

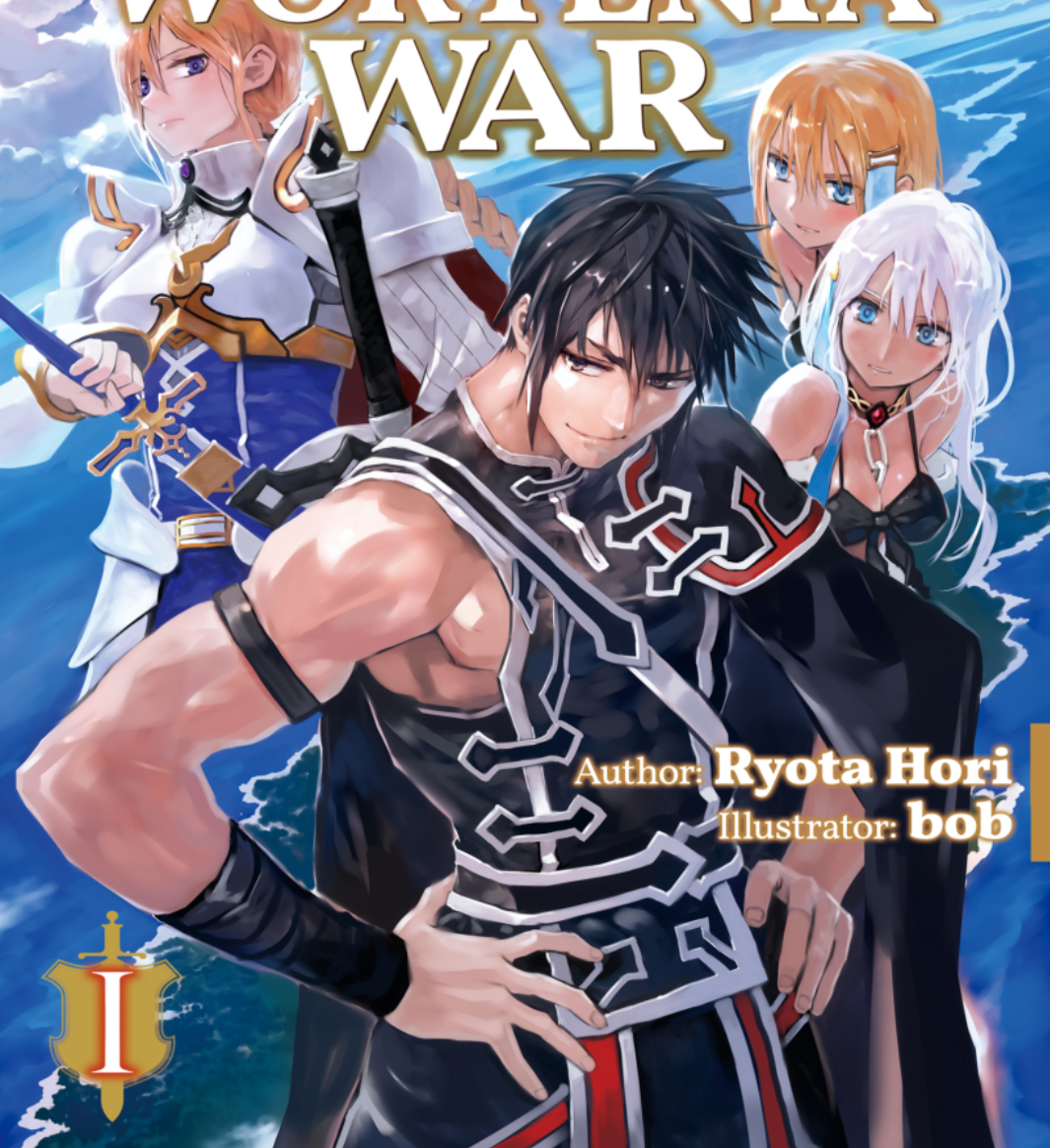
Record of Wortenia War: Volume 1

Ryota Hori

VISIT...

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RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



Author: **Ryota Hori**
Illustrator: **bob**

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The sound of
metal clanging and
sparks spread out.
A sword swung
down. A sword
brandished up.

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



Sara

Laura

Beautiful twin sisters captured by a group of bandits.

Shardina Eisenheit

The Princess of the Empire of O'tormea.
Leads an order of knights in pursuit of Ryoma.

Saitou

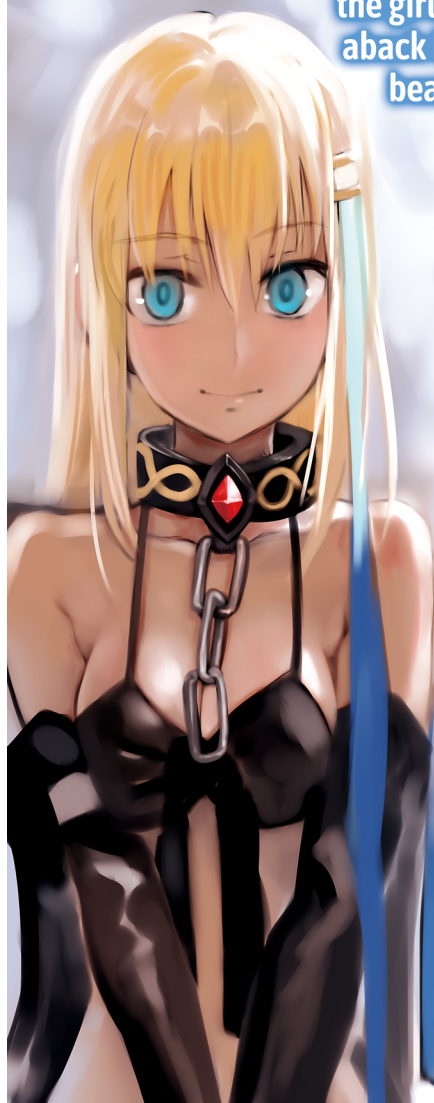
Japanese who have been summoned to the other world, just like Ryoma.
Serve Shardina but operate independently at the same time.

Sudou

Ryoma Mikoshiba

A high schooler summoned to another world by the Empire of O'tormea.
Overflowing with talent, he strives to become a supreme ruler.

Ryoma once
again stared at
the girls, taken
aback by their
beauty.



RECORD OF
WORTENIA
WAR

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



Ryota Hori



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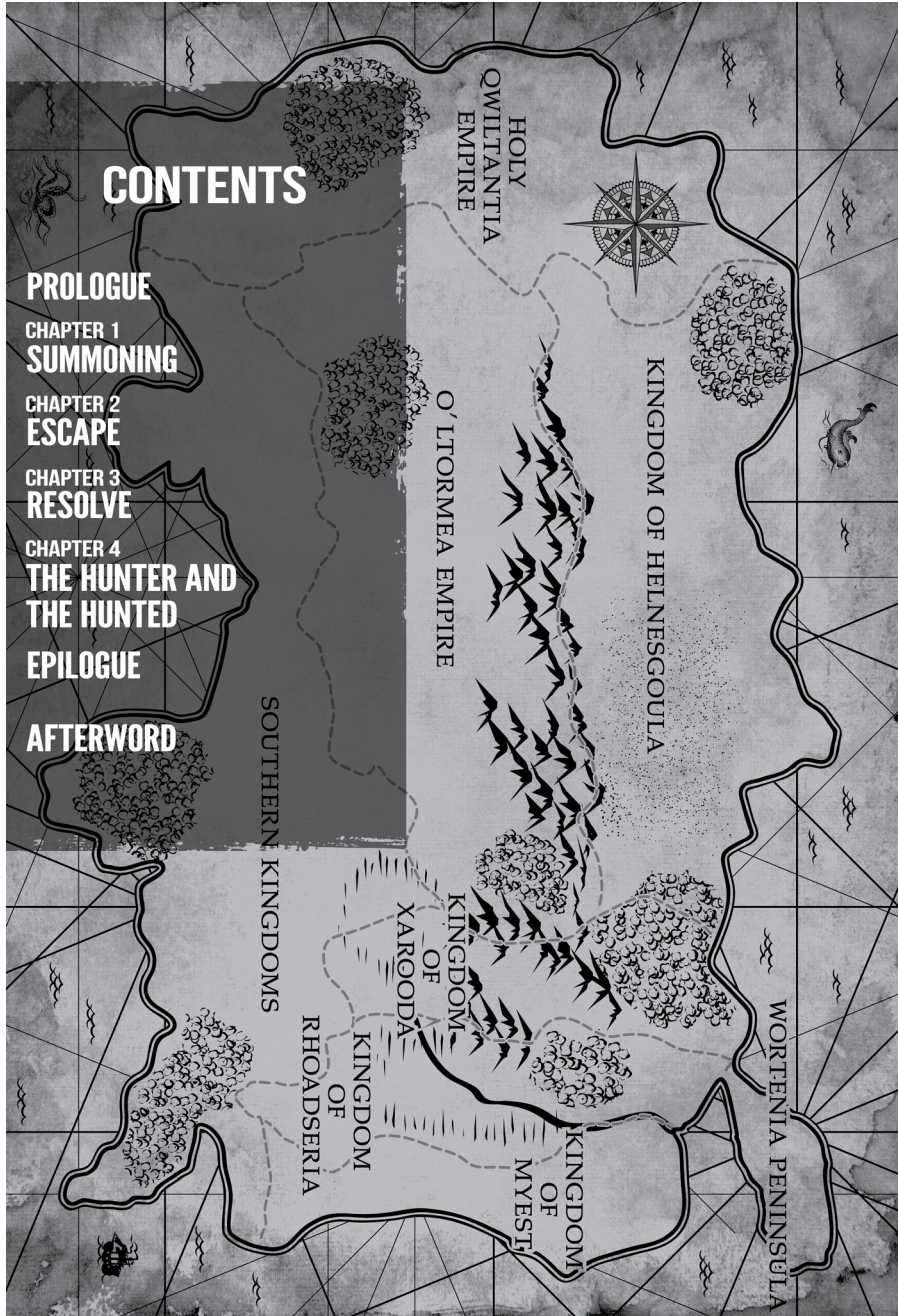
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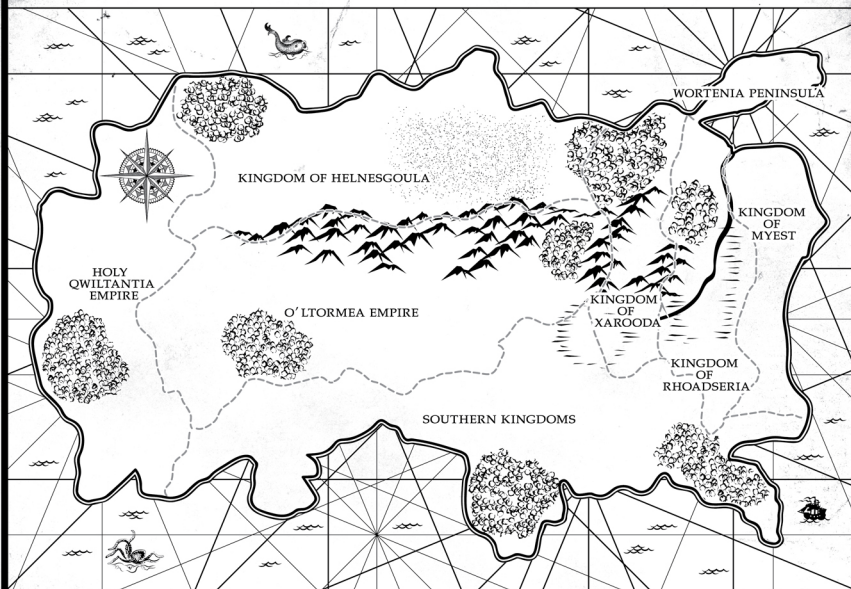
THE HUNTED

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WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



❏ O'tormea Empire

An empire situated at the center of the western continent. Seeks to unite the western continent under their hegemony.

❏ The Kingdom of Rhoadseria

One of the three countries reigning over the eastern side of the western continent. Blessed with ample water from the river Thebes, its granaries are always full. With the Kingdom of Xarooda to its west and the Kingdom of Myest to its north, it is under constant threat of hostilities. General Hodram and Duke Gelhart have seized power over the country, and now serve as its de facto leaders.

❏ The Kingdom of Xarooda

A mountainous country that shares its western border with O'tormea. Surrounded by steep mountains which form a natural fortress around it, its production consists mostly of iron ore, which it has an abundance of. Has been capable of somehow holding back the Empire's advance so far. Relies heavily on food imported from the kingdom of Rhoadseria, its eastern neighbor.

❏ The Kingdom of Myest

A trade country that shares its western border with Rhoadseria. Also holds trade relations with the central continent; the largest trade city in the western continent, Pherzaad, lies within its borders.

❏ The Kingdom of Helnesgoula

The kingdom that reigns over the northern part of the western continent. Also advocates hegemony over the continent, and longs to set foot in the central part of the continent. Has an extremely bad relationship with the Empire of O'tormea.

❏ Holy Qwiltantia Empire

The Holy Empire that reigns over the western side of the western continent. Is in a state of cold war with the Empire of O'tormea. Plans to invade the southern regions.

❏ The Southern Kingdoms

A generic term describing the assortment of small countries in the southern regions of the western continent. The largest battle zone of the western continent, the conflicts there are incessant.

Prologue

The Empire of O'tlormea, supreme ruler of the center of the western continent. In an estate sitting in the outskirts of its capital, the city of O'tlormea, two men stood face-to-face.

The darkness of night blanketed the world. Thick clouds blotted out the moonlight, not allowing even the glittering of the stars to shine through. The chandelier hanging down from the estate's ceiling shone thanks to the power of its granted thaumaturgy. Its light poured outside the window, but even that was limited to a small radius.

And beyond that feeble light extended an environment that rejected the life of man.

Most illumination from this world came from lamps lit by fish or plant oil, and very few people could employ thaumaturgy. On top of that, oil was rather expensive given this world's average income, and therefore the majority of people couldn't make use of it as freely as water. So long as there wasn't some sort of emergency, the middle class of this world, the so-called 'commoners,' returned home with the sunset and went to sleep as darkness fell.

If there were any exceptions to that rule, it would be pleasure districts, like the one this estate was erected upon, and the sectors where mansions of the nobility were built. Even O'tlormea, which was regarded as a great power by its neighbors, couldn't match Japan's standards of living.

"It's eerie how deep the darkness can get, isn't it?" A man whispered, looking through the curtains with shivering shoulders. "Almost feels like it could take your soul away... It's been nearly eight years since I've been summoned to this world, and I still can't get used to it. To be honest, I miss my old life in Japan so much it's maddening."

The darkness was pure and impenetrable, with no street lights, vending machines or residential houses to illuminate it. One would rarely imagine that the night could strike such terror into the heart of man.

...But no, it was more than just the darkness of night. This place was entirely different from Japan in every way. From religion and culture, to every minute habit, and even the designs of clothes and hairstyles, nothing in this world seemed to align with one's life in Japan.

And that just made him crave his life in Japan all the more. Those days were good. And the more terrible the present seemed when compared to the past, the stronger the yearning for home throbbed in his heart.

“Well, one cannot help but feel this way, at least when it comes to this. This place is nothing like our sweet homeland, after all. But to find you being so sentimental, Saitou... It is truly unusual. True, we haven’t come face-to-face in some months, and yet... My, I simply must make this a topic in our next regular meeting. I’m sure the other representatives will have a hearty laugh over this.”

The middle-aged man teasing him was seated comfortably on a sofa, sipping on a glass of aged wine.

“Please spare me the embarrassment, Sudou. I have a position and reputation to maintain.” Saitou turned around hurriedly to face the other man, but Sudou merely regarded him with his usual smile.

“No, no. You stand head and shoulders above the candidates for our organization’s future managers, and you’re young as well. It’s only natural the more aged managers would wish to tease you a bit. From their perspective, you’re close in age to their children or grandchildren. Think of it as one of the sole remaining pleasures available to a group of old, lonely men torn away from their families, and play along. You too know what it’s like to lose a family. Surely you can sympathize with their feelings.”

Those words were said in jest, but they had evidently stabbed at Saitou’s old wounds. For a moment, his face distorted viciously.

“Sudou...” He betrayed a slight growl in his voice.

Just how much weight did the emotions behind that utterance carry? The sheer murderous intent seeping from him froze the air in the room. It was his true will brought to bear, a facet of himself he would usually never expose.

An ominous glint flickered in Saitou’s eyes as he glared at Sudou’s face. Sudou, on the other hand, merely tilted the wine bottle sitting on the table once again, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

“Heheheh, yes, that’s a fine expression. That glare tells me your grudge hasn’t diminished yet. That unexpected sentimentalism in your words earlier had me slightly concerned you might have gone soft on us... But, hah, I see that isn’t the case at all. A relief, to be sure. Nothing else would suffice.”

Those words made Saitou tear his gaze away wordlessly. It seemed that Sudou had angered him deliberately. The tense atmosphere which had engulfed the room gradually began to dissipate.

“You’re... one obnoxious man. Honestly.” Forgetting his usual tendency to speak politely to his elders, those words slithered from

Saitou's lips venomously.

Hearing those words, Sudou let out a rambunctious laugh.

"My apologies, friend. No need to become indignant over this. Probing into the motivations of one's subordinates is part of a superior's job, you see. Especially in an organization like ours."

He then set his wine glass down on the table, and, the smile disappearing from his lips, turned his gaze to Saitou. Not a hint of frivolousness remained in his features.

"Well, between you and me, I have great faith in that capable sword arm and bright head of yours... You're the very image of priceless manpower to our organization. And that includes the dark lust slumbering in the depths of your heart."

His black eyes gazed into Saitou, as if capable of seeing into his heart. Like black holes, absent of all emotions.

"And that's why I chose to save you, over all other candidates. Not an experienced militaryman, nor a spy. But you... a mere salaryman, fresh out of adolescence. It is why we have entrusted you with a vital task, one our long awaited aspirations lean upon. I expect you to not betray my expectations."

Hearing those words, a sneer played over Saitou's features. He recalled the powerless youth he was at that time. A younger, haughty and ignorant version of himself, who had blindly believed nothing was beyond his grasp. A foolishness that would ultimately cost him everything.

"I can assure you. By this point, I know that much even without you having to remind me." His clenched fist trembled with humiliation and rage. "It's why I'm restraining the urge to scream even now."

He had to toady up to the hated foes that slighted him, and proactively do their dirty work for them. All necessities to accomplish that secret goal. It was only because he knew this much that he kept the darkness permeating his heart at bay. At least until the day finally arrived...

And still, he couldn't help but long for the past he'd lost at some point.

Is this my weakness, I wonder? For a brief moment, a faint doubt floated up in Saitou's mind. But what Sudou said next washed that doubt away without a trace.

"I am not trying to say there is something wrong with looking back to one's past. After all, we are comrades in the same plight. I can relate to your feelings, painfully so. But we must never forget our objective. There's no going back to the past, after all. Hence why the future is so much more precious. Let us work together to grasp a future that much better."

Saitou nodded silently at Sudou's words which almost seemed to see right through him. There was no changing the past. Struggle as he might, he would never be able to retrieve the things which had slipped through his fingers. Even if he were to keep trying forever...

Hence why he had to fix his gaze towards the future.

"Yes, splendid." Sudou said with satisfaction, seeing the dark flames burning in Saitou's eyes. "If that much is clear to you, I've nothing more to say. Let us go back to discussing work, then. So that we may accomplish our lofty goal, and paint this continent with the flames of suffering and the crimson shade of blood."

The whisper that spilled from Sudou's lips echoed in Saitou's ears like the sweet, seductive whispering of the devil himself.

Chapter 1: Summoning

The morning sun had only begun to peek out from over the horizon. In the garden of a certain estate in Tokyo's Suginami ward, two men faced each other, swords in hand.

"Hurry and come at me already!" An angry shout echoed through the premises, clashing with the usual silence one might expect of a residential district at dawn.

This estate was spacious, though, and the bamboo thickets growing in the yard and mortar walls segregated this estate from the rest of the neighborhood. Perhaps owing to that, no one was there to witness their training.

The source of that shout was an old man, with his white hair tied to the back. He stood roughly 170 centimeters tall. The thick chest peeking out from the gap in his kendo outfit was finely shaped and divided into a well-defined six-pack. His upper arm was thick and muscular, and he held a drawn katana of 63 centimeters in length.

Were it not for the wrinkles carved into his face and his whitened hair, no one would have suspected him to be an old man. His body was that well-formed and trained. And to top it off, his gaze had a sharp, focused glint to it. The kind of glint that would make the common man flinch away from him nervously.

The combination of his features, his physique, the glint in his eyes, and the gleam of the whole, perfectly maintained katana in his hands made this old man into a figure who would strike awe and terror into any man who laid eyes on him.

But the expression of the young man facing him wasn't clouded by doubt or hesitation. On the contrary, he seemed to be enjoying this situation.

"Gramps, if I come at you with an unsheathed sword, you'll die! Not like I care that much if you do, but having to deal with the police would be a real drag."

As the young man spoke, his lips curled up in a provocative smile. It wasn't a bluff, though. He truly and honestly didn't feel any fear towards the old man's menacing aura or the sword in his hands.

This teasing young man towered at a height of over 190 centimeters, possibly even extending to a full two meters. The muscles adorning his body were just as toned as that of the old man standing opposite of him. If anything, his younger body seemed even more

supple and powerful.

Given his height and armor of rock solid muscles, this young man's body weight undoubtedly exceeded 100 kilograms. A veritable Goliath, adorned with a body as removed from the ordinary Japanese physique as can be.

Had he also had a vicious face, surely no one would ever dare approach this young man. But perhaps owing to his good upbringing, he was blessed with a gentle, amicable demeanor, and a face which gave off a certain quality that put those around him at ease.



“Hmph. You think you’re capable of killing me?” The old man regarded the younger one’s words with scoffing disregard.

The disdain was limited only to his words, though. He surely believed in the young man’s abilities, and there was kind warmth residing in the old man’s sharp gaze.

“Who knows?” The young man said, turning a probing gaze to the older one. “I’ve been putting in a lot of training, so it might be about time you fail to block my sword and kick the bucket.”

“Your sword, eh? Well, if that time ever comes, I’ll pardon you from all training sessions, and you can even have my inheritance altogether.”

Regarding the boy’s words with a satisfied smile, the old man gripped his katana with both hands, holding it in a stance at eye level.

“Like anyone would stick around with me for morning practice if you drop dead, Gramps.”

Smirking at the old man’s words, the younger one entered a similar stance with his own katana, its full 90 cm length extended.

“Your inheritance is a tempting reward, though!”

Exchanging insults, the two glanced over every part of each other’s bodies. In their current state, no matter where one were to look at the other, he wouldn’t be able to focus his gaze. It almost felt as if the air between them had frozen. No trace remained of the friendly, intimate atmosphere that resided between them not a moment ago.

True murderous intent emanated from both of their bodies. Nothing but the will to cut the other existed between them.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

They both exhaled at the same time, and the bloodthirst that had reached its zenith spread out from them. Any ordinary person would be rendered motionless, being washed over by such sheer desire to kill.

The two figures intersected, the sound of steel clashing against steel ringing out at the moment of their meeting. A brief shower of sparks danced over the bamboo forest.

Crossing the two meters that separated them in the blink of an eye, the two exchanged positions, once again holding their blades at eye level.

“You shitty little brat!” The old man regarded the boy with sheer fury. “You actually went for my throat after going into your middle stance!”

Any talk about handing over his inheritance seemed to have been completely forgotten by that point. The young man’s slash really did

aim to separate the older one of his soul. But the same held true for the old man, and he had no right to fault the younger one for his actions.

“A certain teacher taught me to even cut my own parents down when it comes to a clash of swords... Besides, if you want to talk about cutting it close, you were aiming for my throat too!”

The old man taking offense to him unfairly made the boy's tone become understandably thornier than usual.

To begin with, the boy's techniques and mentality were all beaten into him since infancy by this old man. The way of thinking that one must only take up the sword when resolved for true, mortal combat was one taught to him by his grandfather. And that was why the young man felt that him being annoyed with him for living up to these methods was absurd.

“Of course I was! My sword always kills with a single slash!” Such reasonable appeals wouldn't reach the old man, now that all the blood had gone to his head. “One only takes up the sword when resolved to take the life of another!”

The young man regarded his grandfather's angry, red-faced shout with an exasperated expression.

“See, that's the problem right there. There's no use for that sort of dangerous thing! Where in Japan can you use those kinds of techniques?! Besides, where do you get off trying something that lethal on your own student?”

True enough, in modern Japan, carrying real swords was forbidden, much less dueling with them. The old man holding that belief as a martial artist was acceptable, but when it came to actually making use of them, the young man's claims would in all likelihood be seen as more valid.

One can polish their killing techniques as much as they want, but there would be little point in doing so without somewhere to make use of them. But hearing his student voice these perfectly reasonable claims only made veins pop out in the old man's temples.

“Quiet, be quiet! Cut your pretentious prattling and get back to practice!” The old man shouted, and swung his sword down on the boy again.

It was a slash that, had the boy not blocked it, would surely have split his cranium in half.

“But I keep telling you! What's the big idea behind these life and death duels if this is practice?!”

The sound of their swords clashing reverberated through the quiet residential district. None of this would bother the neighbors, though, so the two were free to spar(?) as vigorously as they wished.

At first, the two seemed to match each other perfectly. But in the

end, one of them was aged and the other was young, and the scales of victory were gradually tipping in the boy's favor. As diligent as his training may have been, the old man had no chance of matching him. If anything, the fact he kept up with him for as long as he did was astounding.

Pushing the old man back with sheer strength, the boy's sword approached his teacher's neck. But with the sword inches from his windpipe, the old man suddenly slackened his grip, making his student lose balance from the sudden lack of pressure and lurch forward.

Taking this chance, the old man thrust his thumb towards the younger one's eye. Probably realizing he couldn't match his student in terms of sheer strength, he let his left hand away from the sword's pommel and instead attempted to poke his eye out. This sudden attack prompted the boy to pull back and create distance between them.

"God dammit, if this is practice keep foul play out of this! Stop acting like a shitty kid!"

The young man's patience was noticeably at its limit, as his language towards the old man was becoming increasingly profane.

"Hmph. None of that matters in true combat, be it foul, or shitty, or whatever you want to call it!"

The old man claimed there was no such thing as foul play in battle where one's life hung in the balance. There wasn't a hint of shame in his words at employing an unarmed attack in the middle of swordplay practice. If anything, the fact that the boy was aware and capable enough to anticipate and judge that unarmed attack meant he wasn't nearly as reasonable or normal as he made himself out to be...

Their training always carried with it the risk of injury, and even death. But that was only because the two of them were perfectly aware of each other's skill levels, and always stopped attacking at the very last moment. Their slashes may have been full of bloodlust, but there was no true intent to kill in them. It was training that perfectly imitated true combat.

Leaping back, the old man put his katana back into its scabbard and placed it against the bamboo stacks. He then turned to face the younger man slowly, relaxing his body's muscles and letting his arms droop down calmly. A true, natural posture. A lack of stance is the ultimate stance, as they say.

"Come at me unarmed! I'll show you how your exaggerated strength isn't good for anything!"

"You sure?" The young man sneered. "I'll gladly play along with your request! But do you really think you can beat me with your bare hands, when you couldn't even beat me with a sword?"

But the old man said nothing, simply motioning with his chin for

the boy to put away his sword. Abiding by that demand, the boy sheathed his sword and placed it against the bamboo stacks as well, then turned to face the old man.

He propped his left fist along his face, and lowered his right so as to cover his median line. Shifting his center of gravity to his left leg, he curled the toes on his right foot inward. It was a stance that balanced attack and defense, enabling him to both freely shift from punches to kicks on demand and hide his vitals from attack.

For these two, unarmed battle was just as lethal as swordplay. The suspense made their breathing catch in their throats. But the silence was soon suddenly disturbed... by the sound of the boy's stomach growling in complaint, of course.

He had awoken before dawn, and their training had gone on for over an hour. It was right about the time his stomach would begin to loudly protest its hunger. But his teacher and grandfather wasn't lenient enough to cut training short just because his grandson was hungry.

Crap, I'm starving... C'mon, Gramps, just finish this already...

But pray as he might, the old man showed no openings in his stance. If anything, he was visibly raring to go, and propped to take advantage of any careless opening the boy might expose.

The boy was kicked out of bed early in the morning and forced to participate in lethal training on an empty stomach... When suddenly, an angel descended to save him.

"Would you cut it out already?! I go to the trouble of making you breakfast and this is what you do? God. Why are you two even playing around so early in the morning?"

A girl clad in an apron, her black hair tied in a ponytail, appeared at the edge of the boy's line of sight. She was an attractive young woman with willful black eyes, standing a hair over 170 centimeters tall.

Her name was Asuka Kiryuu.

"Me? Playing around? With this geezer? Your humor could use some work..."

At the very least, the young man wasn't going on these bouts of early morning practice, waving real swords around or fighting in semi-mortal unarmed combat, for fun.

"Well, what were you doing, then?" Asuka narrowed her eyes at the boy, who shook his head in an almost offended manner.

Her pointed question made the boy tilt his head quizzically, looking for the right words to describe what was far too dangerous to be considered normal training.

"...Trying to kill each other?"

The moment those words left his mouth, a blunt sound echoed

against the bamboo stacks, and with it, the sound of a fist clashing against an open palm.

“O-Ouch...”

“Stop talking like a moron already!” Cocking a perfectly shaped brow in annoyance, Asuka threatened him with ladle in hand.

Where did she even pull that from?

The ladle Asuka was currently holding had landed a blow on the young man’s head, brandished in what could truly be described as lightning speed.

As extremely refined as his physical capabilities were, the blow she had landed still smarted greatly. As proof of his capabilities, he had caught the attack the old man unleashed on him — a fist with the third finger’s second joint extended like a horn — the moment he flinched from Asuka’s attack. It lacked the force of a normal punch, but in exchange was optimal for penetrating the opponent’s vitals.

In this way, the boy had blocked the blow aimed at his temple with a reaction that was equally attributable to both instinct and reflexes developed from ruthless training. And despite that, he failed to block the girl’s attack.

Though, if anything, this was far preferable to what he had read in old comics. Whenever the hero in those comics would try to lay a hand on another girl, the heroine would bash him over the head with a hammer. He could usually avoid speeding bullets, but oddly never succeeded in dodging the heroine’s hammer.

Indeed, surely this situation was the lesser of two evils. As well built as his body might be, a blow from a hammer would still kill him...

“Ah, Asuka. Enjoying your quarreling newlyweds act?” The person who had just been responsible for the boy being beaten over the head with a ladle addressed Asuka with a nonchalant expression.

Not a trace of the intimidating vigor he had during training remained in his voice; he seemed like an amicable old man you might find anywhere.

I might have blocked it, but he still launched a surprise attack at me, and here he goes, just laughing like nothing happened. This is why I hate this geezer...

Honestly speaking, even though it was his grandfather, he couldn’t keep up with this disparity in his behavior.

“What are you saying, Gramps! I’ve got a boyfriend already... And besides, like. This is Ryoma we’re talking about.”

Saying this, Asuka directed a meaningful gaze in the boy’s direction. The kind of look a cat might eye a mouse with. It seemed no matter how he replied to this, it would walk him straight down the path to hell.

Seriously, this is no joke. I don't want this any more than you do.

If one were to consider her as a young woman, Asuka Kiryuu was indeed very attractive, and the young man had no intention of denying that. But it was also a fact that the years they had spent together invalidated something that would have made their relationship develop into a romantic one. In this young man's eyes, Asuka Kiryuu was something of a sister.

Not that he had the courage to voice those words anywhere but in his heart. He was more familiar with his cousin's personality than he cared to be. So he held his tongue. This was the only safe path available to him. No one would have to get hurt this way.

"Don't say that, Asuka." But there was someone here adamant on disturbing this peaceful equilibrium. "You wouldn't be coming every morning to make him breakfast if he was just a childhood friend, would you now?"

The old man stubbornly kept teasing Asuka. Was it out of true curiosity he was doing this, or did he have some ulterior motive in mind? Whichever it was, the end result would not be one the young man would appreciate.

But contrary to the boy's expectations, Asuka simply smiled innocently.

"Nah, not really. I'm not doing this for free, after all. My monthly allowance gets upped by a cool twenty thousand yen for doing this!"

Those words made everything click into place in the young man's mind. So she wasn't doing this out of the kindness of her heart. Apparently, his aunt had negotiated things with Asuka to boost her allowance in exchange for this.

"Ahh... To think my own flesh and blood would be so miserly..."

As the old man whispered those words with exasperation, a certain thought floated up in the back of the boy's mind.

Right, auntie made a killing in trading stocks, didn't she...?

Like mother, like daughter, it seemed. Asuka Kiryuu was graced with an attractive face and well-formed figure, as well as a sharp, keen head on her shoulders. On top of this, she was friendly and amicable, and didn't come off as a snob, either. This winning combination made her one of the more popular girls in school.

She excelled at cooking, and she was capable when it came to cleaning, laundry and handicraft, among other housework. She was, in many ways, perfect. True, she could be strict when it came to managing a budget, but that just meant she had a sense for economics; it couldn't be really seen as a point against her.

And while she may have seemed like the ideal girl to anyone else, the boy couldn't help but laugh at the idea. He was far too close to Asuka to view her as a woman.

“Aaah!” Asuka suddenly raised her voice, examining the watch on her right hand. “I’ve got archery club practice to get to, so I’ll be off. Make sure to wash the dishes when you’re done, got that, Ryoma?!”

With that parting remark, Asuka took off her apron with an exaggerated caricature of a calico cat drawn on it, and ran towards the main building.

“Hmph... Such a hurry this early in the morning.” The old man said, crossing his arms with a satisfied expression.

“Wouldn’t we have more time to eat if you didn’t tease her so much, Gramps?” The young man pointed out this valid criticism.

In practice, this old man’s tendency to say the wrong thing at every turn and ruin the atmosphere for the sake of his own enjoyment was truly a bother.

“It’s because you don’t show enough respect to your elders.” The old man said, puffing up his chest without so much as a trace of remorse.

He had no intention of addressing the younger man’s complaint. Apparently the word ‘introspection’ didn’t exist in his lexicon.

Damn geezer! I’ll end up strangling you one of these days...

Grandfather or not, he truly was bothersome.

“Haaah...” The boy gave a long sigh, one that betrayed his true feelings.

“What’s wrong?”

Ignoring the old man’s question, the boy made his way to the main building. Wasting his time on dealing with his grandfather left him with little time to eat, to say nothing of washing off all the sweat. As detached as the boy was from his appearance, going to school when he smelled of sweat like this was out of the question.

He went on to take a shower and wash off, as he did every morning. Then, after changing into his school’s blazer uniform, he walked over to the dining table, only to find his breakfast had long since gone cold. As expected.

The boy’s name was Ryoma Mikoshiba. He was, as one could probably surmise, a young man who wasn’t quite blessed with joy in his life, at least from the perspective of the common person. Ryoma saw it differently, however.

Every day, he practiced martial arts with his grandfather, the kind of severe training that would likely be seen as nothing else but abuse from the eyes of a bystander. When he was still an unskilled child, scrapes and blue marks were an everyday occurrence, and given that he trained with a wooden sword and no protective gear whatsoever, a fracture or two was to be expected.

Despite the old man going easy on him at times, he was still hospitalized after taking a blow from a wooden sword to the head. It

was that kind of severe training, but Ryoma stuck to it nonetheless. He'd kept up this routine for as long as he could remember, so he'd been going at it for at least ten years.

Had he truly wanted to stop these training sessions, there were plenty of opportunities to do so. The ward's child welfare department was an option, as were Asuka's parents, the Kiryuus. They all offered their aid to Ryoma, but he still chose to reject their help by his own will.

One reason for that was, his grandfather wasn't a purely strict person. Outside of training, the old man treated his grandson with honest affection. If nothing else, he didn't have the kind of cruel, distorted heart that would derive pleasure from hurting a child.

And the other reason was, Ryoma himself enjoyed his grandfather's training. A combat theory that assumed true combat, and mental training based on the premise of combat with one's life at stake. It was inherently different from modern martial arts, which had mostly been converted into sports. If one were to categorize it properly, the training Ryoma went through felt closer to military training.

It was a martial art that would seem like heresy from the perspective of modern times, but it seemed to be a perfect match for Ryoma. In fact, one time in primary school, a teacher invited him to a judo training session, but Ryoma never went back there after the first visit. His young heart sensed that it wasn't what he was looking for.

And ever since, Ryoma had devoted himself to that training with greater vigor. He may have cussed and complained every day, but he willingly chose to live with his grandfather in this quiet neighborhood in the Suginami ward.

Ryoma's parents had apparently passed away when he was a child. 'Apparently,' because his grandfather never specified how they had died. He didn't know if it was by disease or an accident, and he'd never so much as seen their graves. They could still be out there somewhere, alive and well, for all Ryoma knew.

However, he honestly didn't care one way or another for his parents, who had never been there for him. Alive or dead, it didn't change the fact that they never raised him. And so, he had no interest in them. Ryoma Mikoshiba was, for better or worse, a realist.

While different people have different notions of what counts for attractive, Ryoma was by no means an ugly man. He wasn't much of a pretty boy either, though. His facial features were what one might positively call manly, or put more negatively, distinct. It could be more simply summed up as a typical Japanese face.

His physique was, in a word, large. His upper arm was about as thick as a slim woman's waist. But this mass wasn't the result of fat,

but of perfectly developed and tempered muscles of steel. His arms and thighs were as thick as logs, putting him in contrast to the thin macho types that were popular nowadays.

His fellow high schoolers gave him the nickname 'The Sleeping Bear,' inspired by his usual gentleness and beast-like physique. Or at least that was the surface-level explanation. Only a select few were aware of the true meaning behind that name, and they weren't ones to speak on the matter openly.

No, even they weren't aware of Ryoma's true self.

Ryoma had his own personal complex; his face made him seem older than he truly was. People had estimated his age at anywhere from twenty-four years old to an embarrassing thirty years old. The kind of estimates that shocked Ryoma so badly, he would lie in his bed moping over them.

That said, it wasn't that his face actually seemed that much older. He didn't have a baby face or anything of the sort, but it was overall average. He could have passed off as a year or two older, but that was it. If any factors could be attributed to the problem, it was his calm demeanor coupled with his distinct physique, ill-befitting to a regular Japanese person.

If there was any positive side to all this, it was enabling him to buy alcohol at convenience stores without the cashier bothering to ask for ID. Once, when Ryoma was a kid, his grandfather had gotten drunk and offered some to him as a joke; this led him to develop a taste for alcohol.

His grandfather wasn't particularly noisy about the matter either, never really warning him too strictly about it. If anything, he seemed happy to have someone to drink with.

Ryoma's hobbies were watching movies, reading books and playing video games. While his athletic skills were far from bad, he was the type of person who enjoyed being alone in his room. He wasn't anti-social, but he didn't appreciate things being too lively. Owing to these traits, he didn't attract much attention in school except when it came to his size, and he naturally didn't have a girlfriend.

And so, seen from the perspective of the common person, Ryoma likely seemed like a young man who wasn't quite blessed with joy in his life. And that was probably the value of the person called Ryoma Mikoshiba. But if he had lived on longer in Japan like this, he would surely someday come across a woman he would love and go on to create a warm household with her.

But the goddess of fate had no plans of allowing this humble dream of his to come true. For on this very day's lunch break, he would be cast down into hell.

"Phew, finally time for lunch..." Ryoma Mikoshiba sighed as his

final lesson for the morning drew to a close.

While it wasn't a school centered on getting students into university, it was still a public high school with a fairly high admittance rate. Ryoma had only enrolled this spring, but the material was already very hard to keep up with.

Ryoma wasn't particularly dumb, but he tended to show exceptional intelligence when it came to topics that agreed with him, while not being quite as smart when it came to topics he didn't like. In other words, he had a fundamentally whimsical and free personality.

Ryoma stretched hard in his chair. His favorite topics were history and literature. He could be described as having an interest in the humanities, but despite that, he was terrible when it came to English.

I mean, I live in Japan. Why can't I just study Japanese and leave it at that?

The day's fourth class was that very same abhorred English, and the exhausting weight of that fact weighed down tremendously on Ryoma's nerves.

Well, whatever. I'll just eat lunch on the roof, and maybe take a nap. It's nice out today and all.

While mumbling complaints that didn't particularly gel with modern-day international society, Ryoma reached into his bag and took out a wrapped lunch box. Asuka had made it for him that morning. With his lunch box and a plastic bottle full of tea in hand, Ryoma made for the classroom's door.

But one of his classmates, who was preparing to eat lunch with her friends in the classroom, suddenly called for him as he was about to leave.

"Mikoshiba... Are you going to eat on the rooftop again? How about you have lunch with us for once? I wanted to talk to you about club activities, too."

Her voice stopped Ryoma near the door. And after a moment of hesitance, he turned to her and said with a smile, "Sorry, I can't. Maybe next time!"

It wasn't that Ryoma didn't want to eat with the girls. No, the appeal of eating lunch with the girls in his class wasn't lost on him in the slightest. But he had two reasons to refuse her offer.

The first reason he refused to eat lunch with his classmates was a fairly simple one; he didn't want them to see his boxed lunch. Asuka always adorned it with cute garnishments, and it didn't match with his own image, or at least so he thought.

Someone out there had once gotten the idea to invent what was known as the *chara-ben*. It was a boxed lunch whose ingredients assumed the shape of various cartoon characters, and went on to become an art form mothers from all walks of life would pour their

own blood and sweat into mastering.

And Asuka was quite proficient at making them, too. Her creations ranged from a certain electric mouse from a video game, to just about any other character one might think of. And Ryoma had to admit her skill at doing so was certainly impressive, and even admirable. Whenever he stood in the kitchen and tried to cook, he came to appreciate just how skilled Asuka was.

But if he was allowed to be honest, he wished she would stop making them entirely. Carrying one of these into high school was... Well, it may go over well with the girls, but it would squander any dignity he had among the boys. Up until middle school, he'd eaten at the cafeteria, so there was no problem there. But with the advent of high school, he had to start bringing his own lunch.

Ryoma didn't have parents, and his grandfather wasn't the type of person to make him a boxed lunch, so he made do with bread from the school store. But sometime in mid-April, Asuka suggested the idea of making him lunch. He gratefully accepted this gracious offer, but he wasn't quite surprised when he opened the box the following lunch break.

It's a good thing no one saw that...

The memory still made him shiver a little. He wolfed it down before everyone else could see it, somehow retaining what little traces of dignity he'd managed to build up to that day. But when he called her to complain after school, his lunch the following day was the most basic of lunches imaginable; rice with a single pickled plum.

Breakfast was pretty bad, too... She made us cornflakes with milk and nothing else...

Not that he intended to slight cornflakes with milk as a breakfast option, but it was nothing short of torture after a harsh session of morning training.

But he still endured his hunger until lunch, only to once again be met with despair when he opened the lid on his usual boxed lunch. In the end he swallowed his pride and apologized to Asuka, cursing in the bottom of his heart all the while. He knew perfectly well that buying bread or making his own lunch would just sour Asuka's mood further.

And so it was that Ryoma Mikoshiba's boxed lunches were all decorated in this manner, prompting him to flee to the rooftop and eat alone every time. It was the other reason why he had refused his classmate's offer this morning.

"You keep saying you'll join us next time!" She said. "And you always go straight home when school ends. With a body like yours, you're wasted on the literary clubs! C'mon, my upperclassmen won't stop pestering me about it. Come check out the karate club. All you

have to do is watch, so please?”

She looked at him with an upturned gaze. It was a fairly adorable gesture, the kind that would render most men incapable of doing anything but nod at her suggestion. But Ryoma stubbornly shook off the temptation. These kinds of recruitment tactics had become an everyday routine in the month since he'd entered this school.

“Didn't I already tell you? I don't intend to do kendo, karate or join the track team. I'm really sorry, but I can't come.”

He was up against a highschool girl, and one of the more attractive and influential ones in his class at that. He didn't want to refuse in a way that would express his displeasure too forcefully, so as to not buy her animosity. So, while minding to keep his tone and wording as delicate as possible, Ryoma made his refusal as clear as he could. Especially since the mention of karate made the other classmates listen in on their conversation.

While this school focused on academics, it was also pretty serious about sports. Their achievements when it came to kendo were especially remarkable. They won the regional tournaments regularly, and while they never won the national competitions, it wasn't unusual to find this school ranked in the top 16 or top 8.

So what would happen when a brawny new student like Ryoma Mikoshiba were to enroll into the school? As one might expect, every club imaginable immediately began trying to recruit him, and all 190 or more centimeters of tempered muscle that went around with him. These weren't a bodybuilder's muscles, developed for the sake of showing off, but a supple armor of flesh, graced with just the right amount of fat. It was obvious he had experience from some sort of club.

“Hmm, well, I guess I can't force you to come today. Still, I hope you'll at least consider it. We'll be able to kill it at the nationals for sure if you join!”

With that said, she jauntily turned around and returned to her friend's desk. She probably already knew from experience that hounding him stubbornly wouldn't do her any good.

She does this day after day, and she still doesn't give up... Maybe I'd consider it if she just invited me for lunch like a normal person...

Smiling wryly at her retreating figure, Ryoma placed his hand on the classroom door.

Asuka's boxed lunch wasn't that much of an issue, honestly. He could just buy some bread or another boxed lunch when eating with them, and then eat Asuka's for a snack later. But there was another major reason Ryoma didn't make that choice.

Simply put, their repeated attempts to recruit him into their clubs were irritating. Not that he thought there was anything wrong with

sports or martial arts clubs in and of themselves, nor did he have any intent to pass judgment on people who devoted their lives to them.

But now that they had all become glorified sports, divided by weight classes and based on gaining points, Ryoma didn't find them the slightest bit interesting, and had no desire to do them only for the sake of showing off his strength.

For Ryoma, martial arts were a tool for killing an opponent, and to keep himself from being killed at their hands. It wasn't something he wanted to make a show out of, and he didn't see it as something to compete for superiority with. But he knew full well that this line of thought didn't align with modern-day peaceful Japan, and no matter how much he tried to explain it with words, he wouldn't be understood or accepted.

The majority of people saw martial arts as nothing more than sports, or otherwise, a form of mental training or a piece of culture to preserve. And there was a difference as wide as heaven and earth between that line of thinking and Ryoma's, a gap that could not be bridged or mediated.

So Ryoma simply refused, saying nothing else, and on sunny days like this he would flee to the rooftop to eat his lunch and nap until the bell rang. It was better for everyone this way.

"Right, see you later, then." Ryoma threw those words in the direction of his classmates' inquisitive gazes and left the classroom.

Right, that day was the same as any other. But that peaceful time would not last for much longer.

It happened just as Ryoma was climbing up the staircase to the roof. This was when his long, long journey began.

"Huh?" Suddenly, Ryoma lost all sensation of the floor beneath his feet.

His body began to fall vertically. It wasn't that he missed a step. The floorboards comprising the stairs he was walking on had suddenly disappeared. Ryoma reached out, trying to grab onto the staircase's edge and regain his balance, but the rest of the staircase had seemingly disappeared along with the floorboards, and his hands groped at nothing but air.

Looking up, he saw the light of the school building's lamp becoming smaller and smaller, eventually disappearing altogether. He simply kept on falling into this dark abyss.

"H-Huh?"

Ryoma soon noticed a change; at some point he seemed to be ascending instead of falling.

"Is this a dream? Or some kind of hallucination?" Ryoma whispered to himself. "What's happening to me?"

A natural question to ask. Falling was perfectly in line with the

laws of physics. The probability of it happening was low, but faulty construction or a powerful earthquake could make the staircase's floorboards come loose. But him floating up defied all logic. People weren't capable of flying on their own, no matter how they might temper their bodies.

Ryoma looked up. He noticed that, at some point, light had begun shining down on him. His body floated up, and Ryoma found himself flying into the light.

"What's going on? The school... didn't have anywhere like this, did it...?" Squinting at the light, Ryoma looked around.

From Ryoma's point of view, this should have been the school, or at least like something that could be found anywhere in its premises. So when he saw the sanctum-like space spreading out before him, he at first thought it was some kind of facility of the school's. But as soon as he saw the people standing around him, that idea was completely annulled in his mind.

His eyes slowly adjusted to the light, and the muddled silhouettes in the room gradually became clearer.

Who are these people...? Teachers? No, they couldn't possibly...

Five men stood in front of Ryoma. One of them was an old man, dressed in what looked like heavy robes, embroidered with silver and gold threads. It was the kind of thing one might expect to see in a movie based on Middle Age-era Europe. But that wasn't the real issue here. The problem lay with the four shiny, sharp objects held by the four people standing behind the old man.



The men had a weight and physique that wasn't much different from Ryoma's, and they looked to be well trained. He could tell with a single glance, from the thickness of their upper arms and thighs, that they weren't amateurs. They were clad in full-body metallic armor, and wore on their heads what looked like ancient Roman Galea helmets; they had chicken plumes on their tops and T-shaped nose guards. In their hands they held halberds.

Ryoma couldn't tell by sight if their armor was the genuine article or not, but having seen his grandfather wielding a real sword in training countless times, his eyes could tell the halberds in their hands were true tools of murder. And if so, that very likely meant the swords sheathed at their waists were also real weapons.

Were it just their armor, Ryoma would be inclined to believe these were costumes and props. They may have had an unusual design, but fake props like these weren't something impossible to buy in Japan if one desired to. Of course, there weren't many who would buy them, and even then, they would be unlikely to actually wear them. But while implausible, it wasn't impossible, and it didn't strike Ryoma as something that could never occur in real life.

But while he couldn't guess at the fact he was in another world yet, the realization that this place wasn't part of the everyday life he was used to dawned upon him with perfect, undeniable clarity. That was owed to how the halberds directed his way were all sharpened to a deadly sheen. Having helped maintain and whet his grandfather's treasured sword, he was very capable of being able to distinguish a true blade from a fake one.

And to top it all off, Ryoma couldn't believe someone would gather real halberds for some kind of practical joke. He couldn't imagine having a weapon like this thrust at him in Japan, which boasted of its peacefulness and pacifism even among the rest of the modern world. Even burglars and murderers wouldn't go to the trouble of finding a halberd. They'd use a knife of some sorts, perhaps, but not something like this.

And finally, the murderous intent emanating from their bodies was real. Ryoma had studied martial arts since he was young, and this was the same kind of aura he could feel from his grandfather. The familiar sensation prickled against Ryoma's skin.

Holy crap, they're serious. I don't like the look in these guys' eyes...

Their leg movements and the way they handled their halberds gave the impression that they were experienced. They were, without a doubt, professional soldiers trained and familiar with the use of this unique weapon.

The instant he realized it, a switch seemed to flip within Ryoma's

mind. As if switching from the ordinary to the extraordinary. He could practically hear the sound of his peaceful daily life crumbling to dust...

"Oh?" The robed old man spoke to one of the soldiers standing behind him, keeping his gaze fixated on Ryoma. "It seems we caught quite a fine specimen with our summoning this time."

The man he spoke to had red plumage decorating the top of his helmet. Out of the four soldiers, this was most likely the captain of the group.

"Nay, Lord Gaius, I believe it's too early to make that judgment. His physique is impressive, of course, but first impressions can be deceiving... After all, we've summoned over a hundred of them so far, but less than ten have proven to be of any use."

The men's eyes regarded Ryoma with the weight of a merchant assessing the value of his merchandise.

"Hmm, true enough... So be it. We will find out just how useful he is once we raise him." Nodding at the younger man's words, the old one gestured with his chin towards Ryoma. "Let us make haste and carve the seal on him... Go on."

Hearing his words, the other three soldiers moved in on Ryoma slowly in a formation, surrounding him while keeping their halberds pointed in his direction.

Who are these people? What's going on here?!

Ryoma struggled to suppress the questions burdening his mind. In this moment, what these people planned to do with him wasn't something he had any way of knowing. After all, he had been going about his business at school just a few moments ago. Being thrown from that into a situation where he was staring down blades in the blink of an eye wasn't something he could so easily understand.

But Ryoma could tell that the men's intentions for him were far from virtuous. One does not point a weapon at another without the intent to do them harm.

Ryoma quickly surveyed his surroundings. The important thing right now was securing a way out. There were four enemies, plus the old man in the robe. Attempting to fight them directly would only end in his defeat, but the room didn't seem to have any windows he could use to escape. He could see what looked like a window used for ventilation around ten meters above the floor, but there was no reaching it without a ladder. Which meant his sole path of escape was the iron door behind the old man.

Ryoma had to choose now. Would he sit quietly and accept whatever ill fate was to come, or make a run for it even if it meant killing everyone in the room?

His grandfather's words floated into his mind: *If you truly wish to*

protect something, show your foes no mercy.

Those were words that were more easily said than put into practice. At the very least, never before in his life did Ryoma Mikoshiba have to resolve himself to murder another. But this extraordinary situation demanded taking extraordinary measures.

Running is probably the best idea, but I still need to figure out where I am and what's going on.

Given his lack of understanding of the situation, he would have to ask someone to explain it to him. If nothing else, he didn't see how taking a powder without an inkling as to the circumstances around him would tip the odds in his favor.

Which left him with one choice. Leave the weakest of the bunch—the old man in the robe— alive, and kill the other four.

That was an unforgivable choice to make. It was more than just resolving to kill; it was a taboo a man living in modern times should never break. But Ryoma didn't hesitate. He chose the path that would lead to his survival, even if it was a bloodied road of carnage. The animalistic instincts slumbering within Ryoma were beginning to awaken.

I'm unarmed, and facing down four enemies in armor bearing weapons... Attacking from the front puts me at a disadvantage. I need to catch them by surprise and take them out immediately, or I'm screwed... Right, only one thing to do.

Ryoma formulated a plan in his head which gave him the highest chance of survival. His grandfather had already taught him the skills necessary to put it into action, though he'd never had to actually make use of these skills before. But this was no time to hesitate.

Ryoma purged all violent thoughts from his mind, and as he did, all his anxiety and anger plateaued as well. Ryoma then dropped the boxed lunch in his hand, and greeted the approaching soldiers with a wide grin. Just as if they were close friends heading towards him.

Seeing the smile directed at them, the soldiers exchanged glances in what looked like confusion. They had never conceived of the idea that a summoned human would smile at them in this way. And their confusion was to be expected. An abducted individual wouldn't normally grin at their captors.

Stricken by doubt and confusion, the soldiers stood still, stopping their advance towards him. And that was exactly what Ryoma had expected them to do.

Then, in a flash, Ryoma broke into a run towards the soldier on his leftmost side, and thrust his index finger deep into his left eye socket, right down to the knuckle.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!” An animalistic howl erupted from the soldier's lungs.

The eye was one of the more vital and easily damaged parts of the human body. Even a grain of sand entering into it could inflict a significant amount of pain, and Ryoma gouged it out without mercy. It wasn't an easy area to attack, but Ryoma's smile had caused the soldier to momentarily let down his guard.

Surprise attacks, by their nature, were launched from outside the enemy's perception. If both opponents were facing each other on equal footing, surprise attacks would never prove effectual. But these sorts of attacks were not limited to merely sneaking around and striking from the shadows.

And so, just as he had been trained to do, Ryoma dealt the finishing blow to his opponent. With his finger still gouged into the soldier's eyeball, he swung his arm down. The soldier's greatest misfortune came from the fact he was wearing armor. Even with his powerful body, Ryoma couldn't hope to defeat four armored soldiers with his bare hands. He needed to find an opening to strike. And the easiest one was their eyes, which granted a man a far more painful fate than mere death.

The eye-gouged soldier fell to the floor, howling and screaming in agony like an animal. Ryoma's gaze fell on his cervical vertebrae, exposed in the gaps between his armor. In one fluid motion, he mercilessly drove his elbow into the soldier's defenseless neck, putting all 100 kilograms of weight his body packed into the blow.

A wet, blunt crushing noise filled the room. It was the sound of the soldier's neckbones snapping under the force of Ryoma's blow. The soldier violently crashed to the floor, blood frothing from his mouth.

It had taken Ryoma mere seconds to attack and dispatch a single soldier.

This totally unexpected development left everyone in the room stunned. And while everyone around him struggled to process what just transpired, Ryoma pulled the sword from the toppled soldier's waist and ran toward the other two soldiers. His surprise attack may have gone well, but he was still at an overwhelming disadvantage.

"Aaaaaaaah!" Roaring like a beast, Ryoma threw the sword in his hands into the stupefied face of another soldier.

Shock filled the soldier's expression. He surely never predicted Ryoma would throw his own weapon away. He hurriedly raised his halberd in Ryoma's direction, deflecting the thrown sword with its guard.

But that too was exactly what Ryoma had expected him to do.

The soldier bent his body backwards to evade the sword, consequently shifting the armor around his throat, exposing it to Ryoma. No matter how much of the body a suit of armor might be

able to cover, there had to be gaps somewhere, and if there were none available, they could simply be made.

Ryoma swung his right hand like a spear with all the force he could onto the soldier's exposed throat. The distinct sensation of the man's windpipe breaking ran through his body.

That's two down. Now the real fun starts!

It wasn't an instant kill, but now that the soldier had had his windpipe broken, there was nothing left for him but death by suffocation. Ryoma pulled his hand away from the soldier and readjusted his stance. Only three remained, including the old man, and the surprise attack's initial shock had worn off for them by now.

"Die!" Someone suddenly shouted behind him, and swung a halberd in his direction.

The soldier's expression was filled with wrath at the murder of his comrades. But Ryoma, thanks to his perfect awareness of his surroundings, easily evaded the attack. Ryoma grabbed the soldier whose throat had been crushed by his shoulders, and leapt over his body, positioning it in front of him as a shield.

A blunt noise rang out. It was the sound of the halberd lodging itself with full force into the doomed soldier's armor, stabbing into his body.

Moron.

Ryoma moved around the soldier, who was desperately struggling to pull his halberd out of his comrade's body, and once again struck a spear hand at his exposed throat.

The human body can be surprisingly sturdy, and a blade thrust too deeply into a person's abdomen can prove very difficult to pull out indeed, as the contraction of muscles is more powerful than the common person may assume. And this time it also thrust into layers of armor, making it even harder to extract.

Two left.

Ryoma glared at the remaining two. The soldier with the differently-decorated helmet, whom Ryoma assumed was their captain, and the old man in the robe.

The captain threw the halberd in his hands to the floor and unsheathed his sword. Seeing Ryoma's attacks probably made him conclude that a more agile and flexible sword would have greater effectiveness against him. He, the fourth among them, would likely be more challenging than the previous three. He truly must have been the captain. He had made an optimal assessment of the situation.

The captain shifted his sword's tip downward, and shifted the blade inwards under his flank, as if trying to hide it.

A flank stance... He doesn't want me to see how long his sword is. He wants to cut me down in one strike.

There was little point to using a flank stance in kendo. The length of the wooden swords was regulated, and the valid hitting points were limited to parts like the gauntlets and helmet. The flank stance was useful for hiding the length of your sword and hitting the legs and lower half of the body, making it mostly unviable.

But Ryoma now held a sword in hand in a battle to the death, which made things entirely different. Especially when it came to swords, where not judging completely or blocking the opposing slash would lead to an injury. And that injury would lead to loss of blood, which would result in his stamina plummeting and his concentration being disturbed by the pain. No, even before that, if he were cut along the leg and had an artery severed, that would decide the battle right there and then.

Looking at the captain's stance, Ryoma accurately realized his intent. There were two optimal slashes that could stem from this stance. A horizontal slash from right to left, and an upwards slash from the right leg to the left shoulder. Any other slashes would require changing stance, and that could create a fatal opening. The man before him would never make such a foolish decision. Ryoma could almost feel the suspense in the air prickling against his skin. While Ryoma couldn't read the opponent's range, the captain stood poised, waiting for an opening to present itself. The only thing that seemed to move sluggishly in this stalemate was the flow of time.

But the situation suddenly changed. While Ryoma was focused on the opponent before him, the old man's voice suddenly reached his ears.

"Spirits of thunder! Spirits of wind!"

Turning around, he found the robed man had brandished his hands towards him and begun reciting what sounded like a prayer aimed at some kind of transcendent being.

What? What is he... No, crap!

Ryoma had no way of knowing what thaumaturgy was at this point in time, but his survival instincts were screaming within him.

Get away!

Ryoma poised his sword and ran towards the captain. It was all or nothing. Charging at his opponent when he stood at an ideal stance was leaping into death's maw. But now a dragon was about to blow fire at him from behind; he had no other choice.

Ryoma dodged the captain's slash, aimed at his abdomen from a right flank stance. Slipping to the captain's left side, his body slipped below the blade, evading it. The sword skimmed inches below his head, cutting through strands of his hair.

It was a risky gamble. Had the captain went for a horizontal slash, Ryoma's body would have been cut in half. But he had went for a

slash from the right leg to the left shoulder, and that choice decided the duel.

Having slipped behind the captain, Ryoma delivered a kick to his exposed back. He did it to position the captain's body as a shield. And that decision was the correct one.

"Gather together at my side. Abide by my will and crush my foe! Bolt Storm!"

Just as Ryoma dove to the ground, the old man finished his incantation and blades of violent wind and heavy lightning shot from his hands.

"He dropped dead!" The old man spat out after firing his powerful spell.

In contrast to his heavy breathing, the old man's face was distorted in a smile, evidently pleased with his successful kill. Among the thaumaturgy in his arsenal, he chose this spell due to it being a particularly lethal one, and having a very short incantation. No one could take it head on and survive. He was confident in this spell's power.

Hence, the old man lowered his guard without confirming he'd actually killed Ryoma... Little did he know how fatal of an error that would be.

Realizing the old man had let down his guard, Ryoma leaped to his feet immediately with the agility of a wild ape lunging at his prey. He closed the distance between the old man and himself in the blink of an eye. The old man, realizing what was happening at once, began reciting another incantation, but it was far too late.

"What? That's impossible! How could you survive that... Damn it. Almighty— Ngh?!"

Overwhelmed by the wall of flesh closing in on him, the old man's face distorted with pain. A low, heavy sound came from the old man's right flank, and his body stiffened as he became unable to move. Ryoma's ruthless punch forcibly knocked all the air out of his right lung, interrupting his incantation. It was easy enough to prevent once you knew the trick to it.

After kicking away the captain, Ryoma dove to the floor. That was all he needed to do. Had the old man released a fire spell instead, its high temperature would cause great damage to Ryoma's body even if he evaded a direct hit. Had he used an earth spell to skewer him with countless spears of stone, Ryoma would have surely been run through by them.

But the old man used a wind and lightning spell, which he considered an instant, lethal attack. The soldier's armor had served as a lightning rod and absorbed the attack, while Ryoma had evaded the wind blades by diving onto the floor. Ryoma instinctively picked up

on the words the old man uttered in the incantation and knew he had to dive down.

People are most careless when they're confident. The old man believed his thaumaturgy was absolute, and that any hit on his opponent would mean an instant kill. Those two pieces of overconfidence robbed the old man of his victory.

"Say, old man. What is this place?"

Several of the old man's ribs were likely broken. As the old man scrambled around on the floor, holding his injured right side, Ryoma spoke to him in a serene voice. But his eyes had a cold glint that would freeze the blood running in the veins of anyone who dared look at them.

"Gaaah..." The pain robbed the old man of his words.

"Hey? I'm talking to you." Ryoma didn't seem to care much for the old man's poor condition, though.

A loud snapping noise rang out in the room. It was the sound of the old man's left elbow being shattered from a kick by Ryoma's leg. He then unflinchingly poked the old man's wounded side with the tip of his fingertips.

"C'mon, old man. Answer me. You shouted at me to 'die' and 'drop dead' earlier, so I know we can understand each other's language."

The old man's appearance didn't look even remotely Japanese, but Ryoma didn't much care about that for now. All that mattered was that they were capable of communicating.

A soft smile played over Ryoma's lips. A truly gentle, amiable sort of smile. But to the old man's eyes, nothing could have been more terrifying.

"Guuuh..."

Refusing to answer Ryoma's question was not an option for the old man. He immediately realized this wasn't an opponent he could pretend to be silent against. But he couldn't speak through the pain. All he could do was curl up and withstand the agony suffered from the kick and his broken ribs.

"Come on, old man. You know, I don't really like doing this sort of stuff!"

Ryoma grabbed the reclining old man's left ear and twisted it up. It began tearing up from having to support his whole weight, and slowly began bleeding.

"S-Stop. Let me go."

There was no telling what would happen if he'd kept his mouth shut. The old man's heart had filled with terror at that thought.

"What? Let you go? Don't you know how to ask a little more nicely, asshole? I thought greater wisdom went together with your

age.”

The smile remained on Ryoma’s lips, but his eyes narrowed down to a slit and froze over in a dangerous glint. That may well have been Ryoma Mikoshiba’s true nature, which had never been seen by anyone before— sealed away by the chains of reason. And this old man would be the first unfortunate victim of that primal nature.

Another dull sound resounded from the old man’s flank, and he let out a scream that didn’t sound possible for a human to make. Ryoma’s well built body unleashed a left punch that knocked the old man, all 170 centimeters of his height and 60 kilograms of his weight, a full two meters away.

A puddle of red spread across the floor. Ryoma had continued to grip the old man’s ear as he punched him away, tearing it off. The bloodied, severed ear remained in Ryoma’s hand.

“Now, old man. Let’s be real honest with each other. It’ll just be a few questions.”

Ryoma strode confidently towards his injured victim. To him, this old man was nothing more than a thing in the shape of a human being. A prime example of how the moment a person stops seeing another as a fellow human being, they become capable of any atrocity.

“S-Stop... p-please. I’ll talk... I’ll tell you... everything...”

His broken ribs probably stabbed into his lungs, because with every word the old man uttered, blood oozed out of his mouth. His face was smeared red from the bleeding coming from his missing ear. It was unlikely he could withstand any more pain. The old man spoke, each word steeped in agony.

“Oooh. Well, that’s a relief. All right, so, question number one. What is this place?”

That was Ryoma’s first question. He needed to know if this place was Japan. Depending on whether it was, his treatment of this old man had the potential to significantly change.

“This is... the Empire of O’ltormea’s... palace, in the capital...”

“The Empire of O’ltormea?”

The old man’s words made Ryoma’s expression turn quizzical. Ryoma liked social studies, and geography was one of his stronger subjects. He prided himself on being able to recite the names of almost every nation on the planet. But he’d never heard of this Empire of O’ltormea the old man spoke of.

“That’s... right... Ruler of the... center of... the western continent...” The old man said, spitting out more saliva mixed with blood.

Hmm... So this isn’t Japan. Well, that’s a relief.

Japan had the concept of legitimate self-defense, but compared to

the United States, it applied in very limited cases. He'd just killed four human beings in self-defense, and was now torturing an old man, even though he had attacked first. It was dubious whether this situation, were it to be investigated by the police, would count as legitimate self-defense or even an act under a state of emergency.

Thinking of it rationally, it would likely get judged as a case of excessive self-defense, with a suspended sentence. At worst, the positions of the assailant and the victim could even be reversed. Of course, a close inspection would reveal Ryoma was certainly the victim, but it would take a long time for that to be proven. Ryoma didn't want to lose precious time off his life just because he'd fought to keep himself alive.

But if this was not Japan, none of that was any concern. Whatever the laws were in this country, Ryoma had every intent of ignoring them and returning to Japan as soon as possible.

"Next question, then. Why am I here?"

That, too, was a fairly obvious question. Ryoma should have been at school, but suddenly found himself in some Empire of O'lortmea he'd never seen or heard of before. He wanted to know why. And the answer he received was...

"B-Because I... summoned you..."

It was a peculiar, if unexpected, claim. But Ryoma's expression didn't change.

"Hmm. Well, I suppose that adds up." Ryoma responded to the old man's words casually.

But no one could tell what he was truly thinking in his heart of hearts, within which brewed emotions he would not dare bring to the surface. There was no way to read into those depths, but his third question made his feelings all too apparent.

"Right, here's a third question for you. And it's the most important one, so you'd better answer. It could influence your immediate future."

Ryoma stared the old man directly in the face before asking.

"I can go back to the world I came from, right?"

His tone was serene. His words may have been rough, but they didn't feel menacing. And that made him all the more terrifying. The old man's heart was beating fast enough that it could burst. That was the question he wanted to hear the least right now. The old man tried to think of a lie that would get him out of this situation.

Should I tell him he can go back? No, if I were to say that, he would tell me to send him back right now. What do I say, then? If I tell him the truth, he'll kill me without a second thought. What if I tell him I need time to prepare?

Gaius Valkland, the man praised as the brains and intellect of the

Empire of O'tormea by their neighbors, and court thaumaturgist of the O'tormean court, could not meet his end at the hands of such a foolish man. The future of the empire rested on his shoulders.

I need to buy myself some time... Once they notice the disturbance, the guards will surely rush in here.

But Gaius's wish would not come to pass. As he wracked his brain while staving off the pain from his fractured bones, Gaius suddenly noticed Ryoma's fingers were coiled around his neck. He simply hadn't tightened his grip, so the old man failed to notice.

"C'mon, old man, that's no good. Lying won't get you anywhere." Ryoma whispered, peering into his face as he grabbed him roughly by the hair.

"I-I did... not lie..."

Those confident words riled up Gaius's nervous heart further.

"But you were thinking of doing it, weren't you?"

Seeing through Gaius's intentions, Ryoma continued.

"I could tell from your blood. You were afraid I'd see through you if you lied, weren't you? So your pulse quickened."

The complete certainty and confidence behind those words rendered Gaius completely and utterly speechless as he looked away uncomfortably. And that attitude told Ryoma his assumption was right.

In truth, Ryoma's words were little more than a bluff. Ryoma did notice the old man's pulse had quickened, but he had no way of telling if that was because of the pain from his broken bones or his fear of the man currently clutching his life in the palm of his hand.

But Ryoma knew he would be right. And that was owed to the expression of terror that overtook Gaius's features when Ryoma asked his third question. The answer to that question was one that would spur Ryoma to kill him. And had he refused to answer, it would have been because he was trying to think of a lie that would get him out of this.

"Y-You... How do you... have that ability..."

Just as Ryoma intended, Gaius's face clouded over with terror towards some unknown power.

"Now, answer me. Can I go back, or not?"

"That is... not possible." After extreme hesitation, Gaius finally spoke those words. "At very least, it is not within my ability..."

His expression was full of resignation. But despite having heard the worst possible news, Ryoma's expression still wasn't overcome with anger. At least, on the surface.

"Hmm... Well, I suspected as much, given your attitude and all. So, is there any way for me to get back home?"

Even after the old man's absolute words of denial, Ryoma's tone

remained calm. And that attitude only made the fear thicken all the more in Gaius's heart.

Why...? Why isn't he getting angry? Why isn't he surprised?

Gaius had summoned over 100 otherworlders over the years, and he'd seen countless reactions. Most otherworlders panicked. They would cry and beg and scream—which was to be expected. But none of those reactions had any power to them, and they were all equally apprehended by the soldiers and etched with the seal of servitude by Gaius.

Of course, some otherworlders realized the threat they were in and tried to attack Gaius and his soldiers, but they were still unarmed and incapable of facing armed opponents. It was a touch rougher, but in the end they were suppressed by the soldiers just the same, and forced to kneel before Gaius.

But the young man standing before him was different. Difficult to believe though it was, this otherworlder he'd summoned today had single-handedly slain four soldiers.

"A-As far as I know... No country... has that knowledge." With countless doubts in his mind, Gaius answered the question.

Given their previous exchange, there was no reason Gaius would lie.

"So you know how to summon people to this world, but you can't send them back. Why?" Ryoma asked, rubbing his chin.

"Th-That's..."

That question prompted Gaius's pulse to leap to the quickest pace it had gotten to up to this moment.

No good... What do I say? What can I say that would save my life?

Judging from Ryoma's previous actions, Gaius realized perfectly well that he was dealing with a cruel, merciless man who spared no pity to his foes. And if he were to answer that question, this cold-hearted man would never let him live.

"Hmm." Ryoma smiled, noticing Gaius's fear of answering. "Looks like you really don't want to answer that... Well, that's fine. I'll answer it for you, then."

Those words made Gaius's features distort with further fright and surprise. His heart felt like it was on the verge of bursting.

It can't be... No, there is no way he could know. No way this person who has only just arrived from another world would... Oh, God... Meneos, God of light...

He prayed to his God, but that prayer would go unanswered. The words Ryoma spoke seemed as though they would cast him down into hell.

"The reason there's no method to send otherworlders back to where they came from is because you never planned to let those you

summoned leave alive, did you? There's no point in sending back a corpse, so you never researched a method to do it, and no country has a method to do so. Is that it? C'mon, tell me. Am I wrong?"

"Y-You..."

Ryoma's words were the equivalent of a death sentence signed by the grim reaper himself. It was the thing Gaius wanted to avoid saying at all costs, and he saw through it all.

'Tis all hopeless now. If he knows this much... Nothing I say will prevent him from killing me.

He had quick enough wits to launch a preemptive attack on them, the combat prowess to beat four armed soldiers with his bare hands, and the cold-hearted nature to torture someone for information. To top it all off, he had the deductive ability to know exactly what to ask Gaius.

Such a fearsome man. If only we could put him to good use... Our empire would likely succeed in conquering the western continent.

That thought filled Gaius's mind. And that could have very well come to pass. But the man standing before him completely and utterly antagonized the empire. He could see through why they summoned otherworlders, and what they saw them as.

Am I going to die here...? No! I mustn't die here. The king's dream, and mine, cannot be crushed here!

Gaius tried to compel his despairing heart. He supported O'ltormea because he shared the ideal of the emperor, who had tried to bring peace to this tumultuous world, and if he were to think of the sacrifices needed to achieve that, giving up here wasn't an option.

Thankfully, my thaumaturgy is gradually healing my wounds. I'll bide my time and wait for an opportune moment... That's my only chance.

Since he had no way of sending this man back to his world, he would certainly never let Gaius live. He already knew that once this man had beaten all the information he needed out of him, his life would be unceremoniously ended.

This fool is lowering his guard, thinking me to be injured... So in the moment he resolves to kill me, I will...!

"Bullseye, huh... Well, that's bad and a half." In contrast to Gaius's tragic internal struggle, Ryoma remained nonchalant.

Ryoma looked up and sighed. He could tell from the old man's face that he wasn't lying. He didn't enjoy torture, and had only done it to ensure the old man wouldn't lie, but alas, the result was the worst possible one. Even so, it still wasn't enough.

If he had no way back, that opened a whole new array of questions he needed this old man to answer. And if Ryoma was to survive, he would get those answers out of the old man by any means necessary.

“What are you summoning people for? If you’re not intending to send otherworlders back, you must be using them as slaves or something, right?”

This question was yet another one Gaius hesitated to answer.

Again... He continues to ask these sorts of questions...

Ryoma watched Gaius’s expression closely.

No! This man already knows the answer. He’s testing to see if I’m lying... He’s only asking me to be sure!

Ryoma was only asking to ascertain if the answer he’d come up with, which he was ninety percent sure of, was the correct one. Gaius realized this when he peered into Ryoma’s unwavering eyes, and after a few moments of faltering, he eventually parted his lips to speak.

“We are making use of otherworlders such as yourself... to win a war.”

It was a terribly selfish reason, steeped in malice. They summoned humans from Earth and sent them out into the battlefield, regardless of their will. They were simply forced by Gaius to shed their blood in the name of the empire.

But even after hearing those words, Ryoma’s expression didn’t change. He simply asked for further confirmation of the facts.

“A war, huh... Can you explain that a bit more?” Ryoma turned his gaze towards the dead soldiers lying on the floor as he spoke. “As near as I can tell, your armored friends here seemed more used to fighting with swords and spears than most people in my world.”

In terms of skill, they were competent enough from what Ryoma could see. He’d gotten the jump on them and survived, but that was mostly thanks to luck being on his side. They were clad in armor, and were experienced in true combat. In other words, most people summoned into this room were far weaker than these soldiers.

“Plus, there’s no one back in my world who can shoot wind and lightning like you can, old man. Or are there, like, multiple other worlds, and you were trying to summon someone with those kinds of powers?”

These kinds of things were common in comics and cartoons, but as far as Ryoma knew, real people couldn’t pull that off.

“No. There are other worlds, but your world is the only other one populated by humans.”

So there was no chance of them reaching out into the wrong world. But that made things even weirder.

“Hmm. But summoning people from my world wouldn’t help you much in the war, would it? Why go to all that trouble?”

Maybe if they were pulling people from an age where knights and warriors existed, they could probably expect some fighting potential. Even commoners from that time weren’t detached from the reality of

war, and were more accustomed to bloodshed in their everyday lives.

But if they were summoning from the present, there was no such advantage. Of course, war in itself still existed, but most weapons of the current age were firearms, and most weapons intended for close quarters combat were, at best, knives. If you were to order people of this age to fight with swords or spears, they wouldn't be able to comply in the overwhelming majority of cases. Bows and arrows were hardly used, even for hunting. In which case, summoning people from Ryoma's world seemed like a wasted effort.

In terms of efficiency, the chances of them actually nabbing someone who'd be useful for their purposes are slim.

Which left one option; they had some kind of value Ryoma was unaware of, which made them worth using.

"That's because you otherworlders have the potential to become the greatest warriors of this world."

Answering that question was frankly dangerous. Letting Ryoma learn of this ran the risk of creating a terribly tricky monster for the empire. But Gaius still took that gamble, despite that danger. Holding his tongue would only get him killed.

"Greatest warriors... you say?" Ryoma's expression took on a quizzical shade at Gaius's words. "You're saying untrained people could become the greatest warriors of this world?"

Gaius's claim understandably made Ryoma tilt his head in confusion. There was no guarantee that whoever they summoned would be a practiced martial artist like Ryoma.

"Are the people you summon limited to some condition, like having a certain degree of power to them?"

That would explain things. But Gaius shook his head in denial.

"Whoever is summoned is decided by arbitrary luck and nothing else."

Is this geezer lying through his teeth? Ryoma thought. *No, that doesn't seem likely, judging by the way he's been behaving.*

The chance of Gaius lying was slim, but that meant most of the people they summoned came here without any knowledge of combat. They came from an age without war, where martial arts existed only as part of culture. Very few people practiced martial arts in modern society as a means of actually fighting.

True enough, Ryoma practiced them as a tool for killing and keeping himself alive. He practiced in case a situation might arise where he would need them. But the grand majority of people weren't like him. The average person would hesitate to kill an animal, let alone a fellow human being. So what meaning was there in summoning them to this world?

"Then what's the point of summoning total amateurs from another

world?"

Gaius nodded at Ryoma's question. "In this world, when you kill another living being, you absorb a fraction of its life force. That is why we summon them."

That was far too absurd and ridiculous an idea for Ryoma's ears. Most people would scoff at it. But he simply stared at Gaius in silence.

Doesn't seem like he's lying. I mean, if he'd wanted to fib his way out of this, he'd think of a more convincing lie... But still, this is pretty far-fetched...

Gaius's expression was entirely serious, and he didn't appear to be lying. Had he intended to tell a lie in the first place, he'd likely think of a more believable one. But this was still an extremely difficult revelation to believe.

"The hell does that mean? You're saying that I absorbed the power of those four mooks I just killed?"

"Precisely." Gaius responded to Ryoma's dubious expression with a nod.

Ryoma looked at his body, but nothing felt different. His arms weren't thicker and his legs weren't longer, so at least judging from outward appearances, he looked the same as ever.

"Sure doesn't feel like it to me."

"The lives of a few people do not amount to much."

"You're losing me."

Killing people in order to absorb their life force... It was an inexplicable phenomenon Ryoma had never heard of before, so it was only natural he would have trouble understanding it immediately.

"To be exact, once you have killed one thousand people, you gain the equivalent strength of one person."

While Gaius explained the additional prerequisites in place for this phenomenon, Ryoma felt aghast and astonished in his heart. Kill one thousand people to gain the equivalent strength of one person? What a gyp.

"Aren't those pretty diminished returns? Doesn't seem worth very much if you have to sacrifice that much for it."

Ryoma's exasperation was to be expected. It seemed like far too paltry a reward, considering the effort required to kill a thousand people.

"It depends on the conditions, and isn't restricted to humans. If one were to slay a single dragon, he would likely gain power equal to that of a dozen people."

Gaius kept talking, desperately trying to keep Ryoma occupied.

Just a little more! If I can just buy a little more time, the guards will surely come. They would grow suspicious of us not making contact for this long, and come to ask what has happened!

That was the last hope Gaius could cling to.

“Hmm. Well, I understand the whole power absorption thing, but still, why go to the trouble of summoning people from my world?”

“One reason is that your absorption efficiency is higher.”

“Huh?” Gaius’s words left Ryoma surprised again.

“In other words, if an otherworlder and a person from this world were to slay an equal number of creatures from the same species, there would be a noticeable difference in the amount of life force each absorbed.”

“I see.” Ryoma’s eyes narrowed. “So what you’re focusing on is the rate of their growth after you’ve summoned them... Even a person with no combat experience could eventually become stronger than the people in this world. So that’s why you’re choosing to groom otherworlders.”

There were likely other secrets at play here, but for now he mostly understood what he needed to know.

“I guess it’s time...” A faint whisper escaped Ryoma’s lips.

And then he directed a gaze that pierced as sharp as a needle at Gaius.

“Well, I don’t know how much of what you’ve said is true, but I’ll believe you for the time being...”

And after whispering that, Ryoma directed a vile smile at Gaius, who was squatting down on the floor.

“By the way, old man. Looks like your wounds are healing really quickly.”

Those words were spoken completely nonchalantly, but hearing them made Gaius feel like his spine had just turned to ice.

After being punched by Ryoma, Gaius had kept himself curled into the fetal position, and had been using a healing spell the whole time. And Ryoma had seen through it.

“Wha...!” Gaius cried out in surprise, and Ryoma simply sneered at him.

“I mean, of course I’d notice that. I broke your ribs hard enough to damage your lungs. You could hardly even speak given how much blood you were coughing up, but all of a sudden you started chattering away, loud and clear. Which means you’ve been healing yourself... while you were holding your stomach there on the floor.”

“Y-You! You knew that all along?”

Ryoma answered his question with a shrug of the shoulders.

“Why... Why?”

Why did you say nothing, and let me lay there and heal myself?

Ryoma simply gave an icy smile in response to Gaius’ words.

“Why didn’t I say anything, you ask? Because I figured you’d keep flapping your tongue, thinking it would buy you time. Besides, you

were waiting for me to show an opening, weren't you?"

"D-Damn you! You let me do as I wished despite knowing that much?!"

Gaius raised his voice in outrage. That was on a level beyond trickery or cunning. To Gaius, the figure of Ryoma smiling down on him could be seen as nothing other than the human incarnation of the devil himself.

"Is it really that surprising? Well, if you were really looking for me to screw up and give you an opening to attack, you were better off pretending to be injured. Poor call of judgment there, old man."

Saying that, Ryoma clenched his baseball mitt-sized hand into a rock-like fist.

"But never mind that. I get the gist of what you've told me, at least. I don't know how much of your story is true, but if nothing else, it doesn't look like I'm going back home for the time being..."

Such was his last warning. Ryoma's lips curled into a mocking smile, proclaiming he had no more use for Gaius. Seeing that smile, the old man instinctively backed away. His fear of Ryoma spurred his body to move.

"Yeah. I wouldn't do anything reckless if I were you. After all, I have to thank you for all the information you gave me. I'll grant you a painless death. You've been a great help, so I think that's a fair trade. Well? What do you say?"

That was the kindness Ryoma Mikoshiba directed towards Gaius, the man who had abducted him. But that kindness didn't register as such to Gaius. Realizing Ryoma's intentions, he took his final gamble. Now would be his only chance to come out on top. No matter how close to zero that probability may have been, he would have to take it.

"Spirits of wi—Kagh?!"

Gaius's incantation was cut short by Ryoma thrusting a spearhand against his throat.



“What did I just tell you?” Ryoma told Gaius as he toppled down to the floor, looking down on him with emotionless eyes.

And then, Ryoma mercilessly delivered the finishing blow, a low kick that sank into the back of Gaius’s head. A sound like that of a watermelon being crushed resounded through the room.

“You shouldn’t have done anything reckless.”

And those whispered words were the last thing Gaius Valkland ever heard, as he was stomped upon and killed like an insect.

“Everything you said pissed me off. You were one seriously disgusting bastard...”

Ryoma spoke to Gaius’s corpse lying at his feet, and then mercilessly kicked it as hard as he could, sending it flying three meters away. It was the kind of anger Ryoma never showed on his face while Gaius was alive, but now it appeared all too clearly on his features. He had the expression of an enraged demon.

Anger can cloud one’s judgment. Losing oneself to anger in the middle of a battle is akin to just asking the opponent to kill you. Having had that lesson beaten into him by training, he was naturally capable of keeping his cool. But that was nothing more than a feat of temporary patience.

Ryoma was no saint, but a simple human being; he was as susceptible to anger as anyone else. Especially in this kind of situation. So Ryoma had kept it bottled up and hidden in his heart until the moment his opponent had breathed their last.

Gaius and his underlings had likely been summoning people into this world since long before they called Ryoma here, and he could only imagine the results of that... How many people were called into this world only to die, wallowing in despair? Those people must have had hopes and dreams of their own.

That thought filled Ryoma’s heart with new sorrow and further hatred towards the old man, and towards the empire of O’ltormea. Ryoma Mikoshiba may not have been one to show mercy to his foes, but he was still a human being— a common man who knew pain and sorrow as well as any other.

Suddenly, a loud banging resounded from the room’s iron door.

“What the hell?” Ryoma reflexively tensed up at the sudden change, straining his ears to pick up on what was happening.

“Is something the matter, Lord Gaius?”

There came another knock on the door. A man was hurriedly knocking from the other side, calling into the room.

“The guards informed us that they heard a loud sound from this room. I understand you are in the middle of your summoning rite, but please, show your face for but a moment!”

“Tch... Figured this would happen.” The voice on the other side of the door prompted Ryoma to click his tongue in annoyance.

Apparently those on the other side of the door were soldiers, much like the ones he slew, who had noticed the disturbance inside. This wasn’t an unpredictable development, but an inopportune one nonetheless.

Do I have a way out of this? Ryoma thought to himself. *There’s gotta be something. Some kind of method.*

But try as he might, he couldn’t come up with anything. There was no window in this room he could reach. The only way out of the room was the door with soldiers waiting on the other side of it, and that didn’t feel like a usable escape path. But at the same time, he couldn’t afford to do nothing.

There’s no smoothtalking my way out of this, either. Maybe I shouldn’t have killed that geezer so quickly.

That regret crossed Ryoma’s mind for a moment.

No, I couldn’t keep the old man alive. There’s no telling what kind of trick he might have pulled. It’s a good thing I finished him off.

True, there was the option of taking Gaius hostage, but he was more than just an old man. He was capable of firing lightning from his hands and kicking up powerful gusts of wind. No amount of caution would suffice if it came to handling him.

But that just made getting out of here all the more difficult. Ryoma had killed Gaius and four soldiers, which meant negotiation wasn’t an option. No, even if it was, Ryoma would never choose to negotiate with them. His dignity as a man wouldn’t allow it. Yielding to these bastards? Never.

Deciding he would need to secure a weapon, Ryoma turned over one of the soldiers’ corpses, lying face down on the ground, to procure his sword. As he did that, an idea popped into his mind.

It was a fairly dangerous gamble, with a less than fifty percent chance of working. Or more pessimistically, thirty percent, if not even less. But he had no other options. After a few moments of pondering, Ryoma came to his conclusion...

“It’s worth a shot...”

Another strong knock resounded on the door. The iron door was secured with a metal bolt as well, but if the people on the other side were adamant on getting it open, it would only take them a few minutes to do so; this world had people capable of firing lightning from their hands. He didn’t have much time.

Ryoma rummaged through the corpses’ pockets. This was another world, after all. Escaping this castle without any money on hand meant he would either have to go on to rob people for theirs, or steal food. Even if he considered finding employment, there was no telling

at this point if this world had any jobs a high-schooler was capable of doing.

In a typical light novel, now would be the time when a helpful character who supports the protagonist and provides him with food and lodging would show up, but Ryoma didn't intend to rely on that kind of convenient development.

For the time being, he fished five leather bags filled with coins from the corpses' pockets. This money was his hope and lifeline. At the very least, he would have to find a way back to Japan, or some kind of work, before this money ran out; otherwise he would be forced to stoop to thieving in order to survive. He didn't know the exact value of these coins, or how long he'd be able to live off this amount, but this was all he could do for now.

"Lord Gaius! Lord Gaius!" There came another knock on the door.

The shouting from behind the door grew louder. The ones outside were becoming confident something happened. Ryoma didn't have any time to hesitate.

Ryoma took off his school uniform and, after removing his leather belt, fastened it around his chest. It was a ridiculous sight for sure, but that didn't matter right now. After tightening the belt, he bound the leather sack containing the money to it tightly.

Next, Ryoma removed the armor from a corpse that was close to himself in size, then dressed it in his own uniform and burned off its face using a torch, in order to make it unrecognizable. He then put on the clothes and armor he had taken from the soldier.

"Phew. I put it on, somehow..." Words of relief escaped Ryoma's lips.

He'd never put on armor, after all. But while it took him a bit of time, he'd managed to do it. Fortunately for Ryoma, this armor wasn't a single suit, but made up by affixing several parts onto the body.

Another loud banging came from the door.

Ryoma had been so focused on donning the armor that he'd briefly forgotten about the people behind the door, but it seemed like they were just about ready to force their way in.

Ryoma approached one of the soldiers' corpses and slashed the carotid artery on his neck. Of course, since it was a corpse, the blood didn't squirt out, since it wasn't pumping through the veins. Rather, the blood from the wound gradually spilled over the floor; more than enough to fool whoever would walk into the room. Ryoma then lowered himself gently onto the floor and lay down in the pool of blood.

"Not the wisest gamble, but it's better than trying to force my way out..."

Ryoma waited patiently for the moment the door would open.

While Ryoma was lying down on the floor, a crowd of soldiers were clamoring behind the door.

“Commander, the assistant court thaumaturgist, Lady Celia Valkland, is approaching!”

In line with the soldiers’ reports, a woman with red hair appeared.

“What is the meaning of this, Sir Rolfe? What has happened to my grandfather?”

The first words to leave her lips were that harsh inquiry, directed at the man the soldiers referred to as commander. Skilled as she may have been, she wasn’t much of an amicable person.

“Calm yourself, Lady Celia.” Rolfe said, a glint in his single eye.

“How do you expect me to keep calm?!”

It appeared she had come in a hurry. Her red hair, usually well-kempt and perfectly done, was ruffled and messy, and her sizable breasts bounced with each step she took. There wasn’t anyone foolish enough to blush at her appearance at this place and time, though. Everyone present was intent on resolving this unusual situation.

“I said calm yourself!” This time, it was Rolfe who raised his voice in anger.

He was a veteran who ran through many battlefields as a member of the imperial guard, and once even blocked an arrow meant to claim the emperor’s life with his own body, a feat which cost him his eye but earned him the title of “The Emperor’s Shield.” The story of his lost eye echoed throughout the continent.

He had earned the Emperor’s trust, and was now charged with the palace’s security as the commander of the Order of the Imperial Knights. The words of this man, who had lived through the mud and blood of the battlefield years before Celia was even born, struck doubt into the heart of the talented assistant court thaumaturgist. Taken aback by his angry shout, Celia seemingly calmed down and took a deep breath to compose herself.

“My apologies, Sir Rolfe. That was a pitiful failure of composure on my behalf.” Celia said, lowering her head sincerely.

She seemed to have realized how agitated she was. If nothing else, she had the presence of mind to try and comb her tangled hair and adjust her disturbed outfit.

“No, I apologize for my own boorishness. ‘Tis only natural you would be disturbed when it concerns your own flesh and blood. I am most sorry for raising my voice.”

Seeing Celia’s attitude, the gaze of Rolfe’s lone eye softened, and filled with the compassion a father looking down on his daughter might feel.

“With that said, Sir Rolfe, what of the situation?” Celia’s tone regained its calmness.

Her face was filled with the cool-headedness and cold-heartedness of the young genius who came to be known as the “Queen of Blizzards” by the neighboring countries.

“We presently know very little.” Rolfe shook his head at Celia.

Rolfe himself had only recently rushed over after hearing the report from his subordinates, and didn’t quite have a grasp on the situation either, but still knew a bit more than Celia, who had only just arrived.

“That is fine. Whatever you do know will do; please, speak.”

“Very well,” Rolfe nodded. “In order to perform the summoning rite, Lord Gaius entered this room with four soldiers. That was some three hours ago now...”

“Three hours...” Celia’s expression clouded over. “It takes two hours to prepare for the summoning rite, and the spell’s incantation takes roughly thirty minutes. Even allowing for some error, hearing no word for over three hours is most unusual indeed...”

A feeling that something had gone terribly wrong nudged at Celia’s heart.

“Yes. According to the report the guards gave me, they heard a tremor coming from the room some thirty minutes ago. I ordered the guards to contact you and headed here myself.”

“I see. And then?” Nodding at Rolfe’s explanation, Celia urged him to continue.

“Upon coming here, I found these soldiers waiting in front of the door. Apparently they’ve been forbidden from letting anyone in or from making any noise during the rite, so some of them went to make the report while they remained here on standby... Isn’t that right, men?!”

Rolfe suddenly shouted, turning his gaze to the two soldiers standing behind. Their expressions were thick with despair, standing as proof that they were uneasy about whether they had handled the situation correctly.

“I see... Your judgment was quite sound.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Celia looked to the soldiers, who stood in attention to her words of encouragement. Receiving her smile made the soldiers’ expressions relax. They had confidence they had done their job as palace guards properly, but there weren’t many nobles who would see it as such. At worst, they might demand to know why they did not barge in at once, and punish them for it. But since they realized that wasn’t the case, their expressions softened.

Rolfe ignored the two soldiers’ demeanor, and continued his explanation. Now wasn’t the time to concern himself with their actions.

“But the fact remains that too much time has passed. So I’ve taken it upon myself to try and knock a few times since I arrived, but...”

“No response?”

“Aye, milady.”

“The preparations for the rite and the incantation for the spell shouldn’t take three hours, even at the longest.” Celia worded her thoughts after hearing Rolfe’s explanation. “And if a practitioner as skilled as Grandfather hasn’t come out after that long... After all, Grandfather has conducted over a hundred summoning rites...”

“Quite right,” Rolfe nodded at Celia’s doubtful words. “Lord Gaius has conducted the summoning rite one hundred and twenty one times, and has never once failed it.”

Rolfe’s expression stood as evidence of his deep bond and trust in Gaius’s skill as a thaumaturgist. The rite of summoning from another world was well known in this world. The existence of otherworlders was documented in the ancient myths of other countries as well. But while the rite’s existence was well known, it wasn’t something which was regularly performed. Few thaumaturgists were capable of performing it, even if one were to search the western continent up and down.

The summoning rite was the greatest, most difficult secret art of all. The fact that Gaius Valkland had performed it with a success rate of one hundred percent stood as proof of his fearsome skill. But that was only to speak of his past achievements.

“Yes, so far there haven’t been any problems.” Celia said, doubt hanging behind her words.

“So you think Lord Gaius may have failed the ritual, Lady Celia?” Rolfe’s expression clouded over.

“It is hard to discern at this point. But if we assume nothing happened, it becomes hard to explain the tremor the soldiers sensed. There is no aspect of the summoning ritual which would cause such a disturbance.”

“So you’re saying there was some kind of... accident? Should we have His Grace evacuate the palace at once?”

Rolfe wasn’t foolish enough to naively assume that there was zero probability of an accident occurring simply because none had ever happened until now. And he also knew that thaumaturgical accidents could have long lasting consequences.

A thaumaturgical calamity. The image of the worst possible conclusion flashed in Rolfe’s mind. If anything were to happen to interrupt the summoning rite and the spell were to go out of control, there was no telling what could happen. Having just an entire ward in the palace be blown away was optimistic. At worst, the entire country could be wiped away, just as had once befallen an ancient kingdom of

old.

I may be just assuming the absolute worst. But if that presumption proves to be true, we must secure His Grace's safety, for the sake of our nation...

The emperor's safety, if no one else's, would have to be secured. That thought spurred Rolfe to action. But Celia shook her head, denying his concerns. Had there been a thaumaturgical calamity, some signs of it would have already manifested outside the room by now. Even if its effects were limited to just the room, Celia excelled at detecting thaumaturgy and would detect any disturbance at this range. Which left only one conclusion.

"No. In all likelihood, Grandfather must have made use of his thaumaturgy."

Rolfe's single eye glinted at Celia's suggestion. Gaius may have used attack thaumaturgy while fighting someone.

"Attack thaumaturgy... That's certainly possible. But if that's the case, why wouldn't Lord Gaius leave the room?"

That was the main reason Rolfe couldn't discard the possibility of an accident. Few in the entire continent could survive a spell fired by Gaius, the O'tormea Empire's court thaumaturgist. The idea of something happening in the middle of the rite to immobilize him seemed more probable than that. Of course, Rolfe knew there were no absolutes in battle, but Rolfe couldn't imagine Gaius being slain by someone.

"Maybe he can't leave the room."

"Impossible." Rolfe's expression changed at Celia's words. "Surely a man of Lord Gaius's caliber..."

Celia had pointed out the one possibility Rolfe was deliberately trying to ignore.

"If we consider the worst possible scenario..." Celia's features tensed up.

That was the expression of a person realizing the possible death of a relative.

"My apologies!" Rolfe suddenly lowered his head to Celia.

"Wh-What are you doing, Sir Rolfe?" Celia became flustered at Rolfe's sudden apology.

"Lady Celia, I have erred in my judgment."

I should have broken in as soon as I heard the report. Had I entered the room as soon as possible, perhaps I could have saved Lord Gaius's life.

That thought crossed Rolfe's mind, but Celia shook her head.

"No, Sir Rolfe. It is law that no one may interrupt the summoning rite while it is in progress. If you'd have broken into the room on your own discretion, that on its own may have caused a catastrophe. I believe that no matter what happened, your waiting for me was a wise

decision... So please, stop this at once.”

Soothing Rolfe, she had him raise his lowered head. True enough, no one was allowed entry to the summoning room in the middle of the rite, for fear of a secondary disaster. Such was the level of cautious attention that summoning required.

“I do doubt the possibility of an accident. Had that occurred, its influence would have been made visible to us by now.”

The meaning behind Celia’s words was an all too cruel premonition.

“Lady Celia...” Rolfe noticed Celia’s shoulders were trembling.

She was desperately trying to restrain her emotions towards her one and only blood relative.

“Of course, this is just assuming the worst possible scenario. For now, let us go inside and confirm the situation for ourselves!”

Rolfe could only watch over Celia as she clung to the last strand of hope.

“Since the door is made of iron, it is bolted from the inside. I’ll have a battering ram brought over to bash it open, so please give us some time.”

Rolfe quickly prepared to order his soldiers, but Celia seemingly had no intention of abiding by Rolfe’s suggestion.

“No, Sir Rolfe. We haven’t the time to spare. I’ll break through it.”

Those words made Rolfe panic. The door to the summoning room was rather thick and sturdy, and a normal thaumaturgist wouldn’t be able to break through it. Of course, Celia, being the assistant court thaumaturgist, would be able to; but the problem was what would come after that.

“Th-That’s...” Rolfe mumbled in a flustered manner.

But there was no cutting into Celia’s incantation.

“Spirits that govern over fire! Grant me your protection and abide by my will!”

“Lady Celia, no! Men, take cover!”

Ignoring his attempts to stop her, Celia completed her incantation.

“Crush the foe that stands in my way! Flame Blast!”

A globe of flame swirled in the palms of Celia’s hands, who stuck out her hands towards the iron door. The moment she did, the door distorted, and the thundering sound of an explosion echoed through the castle. The shock and noise of the explosion robbed Rolfe of his eyesight and hearing for a few moments. Heat and the charred smell typical of a fire filled the corridor. The strength of the blast ran minute cracks through the castle walls.

Rolfe’s eyesight gradually recovered, and the first thing he saw was the door, glowing in crimson. The surrounding air wavered with heat daze, as if a portion of hell itself had manifested there. The door,

however, remained intact. No, if anything, with the door burning hot now, it was impossible to approach it. Things were even worse.

This is why I tried to stop her. What is Lady Celia going to do now...

However, before Rolfe could make his will known to Celia, the door crumbled away with a loud noise.

“Come, let us enter.” Celia’s voice echoed.

The soldiers crossed the door, which had been cooled to the point where touching it would bond one’s skin to it, filtering into the room.

“I see... So you used the difference in thermal expansion to shatter the door. Most impressive.”

Celia nodded lightly at Rolfe’s words of praise. She had first used fire thaumaturgy, which made Rolfe believe she was trying to melt the door. He had tried to warn her of the problems that would cause, and then tried to stop her. But Celia understood the issue perfectly well. If she were to use flames strong enough to melt the door, the surrounding area would be reduced into a burning inferno. Celia and Rolfe would probably get away unscathed, but the more simple soldiers likely wouldn’t.

Additionally, they wouldn’t be able to enter the room until the air cooled down. So Celia doused the door with massive heat, and then used frost thaumaturgy to chill down the seething door. The heat caused the metal door to expand, and by chilling it rapidly, the door shattered.

“Come, Sir Rolfe. Let us hurry inside.”

Rolfe nodded silently at Celia’s words.

“Move. What are you standing in front of the door for? Go in already.”

“What’s the matter? Is Grandfather safe?!”

Cutting past the soldiers who stood in front of the door, their breath visible in white puffs, the two of them witnessed the site of a tragedy. The rusty aroma unique to spilt blood filled their nostrils; a scent Rolfe was all too used to.

“Lady Celia... What... What is this...?”

“This is horrible...”

The sight rendered them speechless. They may have predicted this somewhere in their hearts, but even with the reality of it thrust before their eyes, it was still hard to believe.

“Wh-What about Grandfather?”

Looking around, Celia caught sight of the white robe lying on the floor, a unique robe her grandfather especially favored. There could be no mistaking it.

“Nooo... Grandfather!” Celia fell to her knees, collapsing onto the floor.

Rolfe hurriedly supported her, but Celia tore away from his arms

violently and ran over to Gaius, who was sprawled on the floor face first. She picked his body up in a panic. Her hands were smeared with blood.

“This is... too gruesome.” Rolfe grimaced, looking at Gaius’s body lying in Celia’s arms.

Even he, who had run through countless battlefields, could only recall seeing a corpse so savagely beaten a handful of times. From the injury on the back of Gaius’s head, Rolfe surmised he was either attacked from behind or beaten while crouching. If it was the former, it stood as testament to the assailant’s skill; if it was the latter, it stood as proof of their cruelty.

In either case, this would be a formidable foe indeed... Hmm, this is...

Somehow convincing Celia to let go of Gaius’s body, they laid it back down on the floor, and upon closer inspection, Rolfe grimaced.

A single blow to the throat. That was probably the fatal wound. In which case...

The assailant had blocked Gaius’s windpipe, and then delivered a finishing blow to the back of his head.

“Who would do something so horrible...” That small whisper escaped Rolfe’s lips.

Those words were heavy with wrath and sorrow. Rolfe had been on countless battlefields, and the sight of a corpse wouldn’t normally make his heart waver. He would only think of such a sight as the weak having met their demise. But seeing the corpse of Gaius Valkland was different. Gaius fought for many years on Rolfe’s side as a companion, and had helped build up O’ltormea into the great country that it was now.

It was impossible to keep one’s cool in the face of a friend’s death, but Rolfe did all he could to restrain the urge to scream out.

“Is that not obvious?!” A scream of hatred erupted from Celia’s lips. “It was the otherworlder he summoned!”

Her eyes burned with dark flames of wrath at the murder of her grandfather. And the moment Rolfe saw that fire in her gaze, he restrained his own wavering heart.

I cannot say I blame her... They were closer than most fathers and daughters would be...

Celia’s parents passed away when she was only an infant. They died in battle against a neighboring country that once existed near the empire, and it was Gaius who took her in and raised her. He was her teacher at thaumaturgy, and at the same time, her only remaining blood relative. So it was natural for Celia to lose her composure having learned of his death. However...

“Listen, Lady Celia.” He had doubts about her assertion.

“Otherworlders could indeed become quite powerful if raised, but we

are talking of a weakling who was only just summoned. That world is free of war, unlike ours, and from what I hear, they aren't usually allowed to carry weapons."

Judging from past cases, someone who could be that much of a threat had never been summoned before. The most anyone had ever carried on them was a small knife or a metal rod, and the vast majority of the otherworlders who were summoned weren't even apt at using those weapons. From the perspective of a warrior, newly summoned otherworlders seemed to be even weaker than the commoners of this world.

"But...!" Celia shook her head wildly at Rolfe's doubtful words.

No other explanation came to mind. Such was what Celia was frantically trying to say.

No. As Lady Celia says, there is a strong chance of this being the otherworlder's handiwork. But we mustn't jump to conclusions.

Rolfe himself agreed with Celia that the otherworlder was the most likely suspect, but there wasn't enough proof at the moment to be completely certain.

"I do concur with you that the summoned otherworlder is the biggest suspect, but we lack sufficient proof." Rolfe tried to reasonably soothe her protests. "There's a chance something else might have happened."

The only option he had right now was to quell her emotions, lest they blind her and allow the culprit to escape.

"First, we must take stock of the situation and understand what happened here."

Rolfe's admonishment made her expression tense up. She was a genius of such caliber that she had been given the station of assistant court thaumaturgist, even at her young age. Rolfe's words reminded her of her role and responsibilities.

"My apologies. You are right, Sir Rolfe."

"So long as you understand. I will take command, then."

Stopping Celia from lowering her head any longer, Rolfe immediately began to order his soldiers.

"Confirm whether any of the soldiers are alive! And make sure that oddly dressed man there is truly dead. Everyone else, search the room and check if there's no hole the culprit could have left through. Besides that... Did you find anything, Lady Celia?"

Celia shook her head at Rolfe's question.

That outfit does look like something an otherworlder would wear, but why is he dead? Wasn't the otherworlder alone?

She may have regained her composure, but the death of her only blood relative still weighed down on her heart heavily, and her intellect wasn't as sharp as it usually was.

“Sir Rolfe! Lady Celia!”

“He’s alive. This one’s still alive!”

After a short while, the men sent to confirm the survival of the soldiers called out to Rolfe and Celia.

“What?!”

“Really?”

Rolfe and Celia hurried over to where one of the soldiers was lying in a pool of blood.

“S-Sir Rolfe...” The voice mouthing Rolfe’s name did indeed come from this soldier, whom they had presumed was dead.

“Are you alright?”

“What happened? Can you tell us anything?”

As he was the only living witness, Rolfe and Celia went straight to the point with their questions.

“Sir Rolfe... A monster...”

Hearing his words, the two went pale. This man was the only one who knew what had happened in this room.

“What?! A monster...?” Rolfe felt the color drain from his face upon hearing this unfamiliar word from the soldier’s lips.

Celia panicked as well, wondering if her grandfather possibly failed the summoning rite and accidentally summoned some unexpected otherworldly creature.

“What happened?! Come to your senses!”

“Ga-Gai... he...” The two listened to his words carefully, but failed to gather any kind of meaning from the fragmented sentences leaving his lips.

They did gather that some monster had appeared, but the situation remained as unclear as it was before.

“Answer me! What happened to Grandfather?! What monster are you talking about?”

Grabbing the soldier, who was lying on the floor, tightly by the shoulders, Celia shook him violently. Celia would normally never let herself be seen in such a disturbed state, but right now she didn’t care in the slightest about who saw her in this state.

A monster? What sort of monster? No, more importantly, where is this monster right now?

If a creature powerful enough to kill the court thaumaturgist was running around the palace, then things were quite dangerous. This was, quite literally, the heart of the empire of O’ltormea.

But the more Celia panicked, the more dire the situation would become. The soldier, who already wasn’t speaking coherently, broke into labored gasps. His body went completely limp, and he wasn’t reacting to any of their soldiers.

“Th-This isn’t good. Someone take this man to a doctor! Right

now!”

Stopping Celia from pressing the soldier for more questions, Rolfe quickly ordered the soldiers to put the soldier on a stretcher, which they had carried with them into the room, and take him to the infirmary.

“Why?! Why did you stop me?!” Celia raged at him angrily with a demonic expression.

Rolfe remonstrated her. He likely realized that if he didn’t say it now, he would lose all control over this girl, already close to mad with grief. This was probably her lack of experience at play here. Talented as she was, Celia still wasn’t adept at controlling her emotions. She’d finally calmed down, but the soldier mentioning a ‘monster’ made her lose her composure again.

Of course, perhaps that was to be expected, given the implication that her honored grandfather had failed the summoning rite and died. But on top of that, this place was home to royalty and nobles. If any harm came to human life, even the family of court thaumaturgists who gathered as many achievements as Gaius would lose its honor and go into decline. At worst, if he were to be held responsible for the incident, his entire clan would be punished.

Both her feelings for witnessing her grandfather’s death and her desire to defend her family brought Celia’s heart into a state of panic. Rolfe understood this, and yet...

“If you were to continue questioning him like that, that man could very well have died.” Rolfe told the hysterical Celia, trying to speak as calmly as possible without betraying his emotions.

His words didn’t allow for any argument. Questioning that bloodied soldier right now would have surely lead to his death, given his condition.

“True as that might be, look at this situation. Isn’t understanding what happened in this room more important than that man’s life?” But his words didn’t seem to reach Celia.

She was still confident that getting information about her grandfather took precedence over the life of a single soldier, and so she argued against Rolfe’s reasoning. She realized Rolfe was right, but her heart got in the way of her common sense. Still, Rolfe explained the situation in detail, hoping to calm her down.

“That’s certainly important, but the only one who knows what happened is that man. I find it hard to believe you’d get any useful information if you were to question him, wounded as he was. At worst, he’d die before telling us what we need, and it all truly would have been for naught. Patiently waiting for him to recover is safer, is it not? For now, let us focus on confirming the situation here.”

Celia wasn’t able to argue any longer against Rolfe after that. His

words rang true, but her emotions as a person bereaved of her family, and her dignity as a noble, prevented her from being able to wholly accept that.

“Haah... I understand. Your judgment is sound, Sir Rolfe. Pardon me for losing my temper.”

With a heavy sigh, Celia regained her composure. Her snapping at Rolfe was likely the result of the strain on her heart. A genius she may have been, but the lack of experience stemming from her young age was plain to see.

“But I do wonder what monster he was talking about... I cannot imagine Grandfather failing like this. And where did that monster disappear to?” Those doubts escaped Celia’s lips in a whisper.

She was talking to herself, but hearing those words, Rolfe felt something nudge at him. A sense of unease that stemmed from his years of experience on the battlefield. But he brushed that doubt away, not putting it into words.

“True. If a monster truly was summoned from another world, this is a crisis... No, for now, let us inspect the remaining corpses. We may discover something.”

Rolfe himself was rather flustered by this situation, and that caused him to commit a blunder he would otherwise never make—the blunder of ignoring his own intuition. And it was Rolfe’s judgment which would end up cutting short what faint possibility they still had of resolving this situation.

“B-Big trouble! Sir Rolfe, the infirmary! The infirmary is...!”

A soldier burst into the summoning room. The panic in his voice made it clear he was reporting a true emergency.

“Calm down! What’s the matter?!” Rolfe’s angry bark echoed through the room.

The soldier he’d shouted at recoiled at Rolfe’s menacing glare, and made his report through labored breaths.

“Sir! A fire of unknown cause has started in the infirmary... It is spreading rapidly, and has reached the medicine storeroom as well.”

Rolfe was rendered speechless halfway through the soldier’s report. The timing was simply all too awful.

“What?! How can all this be happening in succession? What of the fire? Has anyone come to extinguish it?!”

The medicine storeroom had a variety of combustible substances, and they’d only just sent an injured soldier to the infirmary—their only live witness. Rolfe knew he was only taking out his anger on an unrelated party, but he glared viciously at the soldier.

“Y-Yes.” The soldier said with a desperate expression, overwhelmed by Rolfe’s gaze. “We’ve promptly informed the palace thaumaturgists, and had them deployed to handle the fire.”

The soldier's continued report calmed Rolfe down slightly. If nothing else, the fire didn't seem to have spread to the palace, and that alone was a relief.

"What are your thoughts, Lady Celia?"

Rolfe turned his gaze to Celia, who stood beside him deep in thought, with her finger pressed against her well-formed chin. Doubt surged up in his heart again.

"Something feels very wrong..." She answered Rolfe's question without hesitation.

It seemed she had clued into that as well.

"So... you think so too, milady?"

"Yes... Too many things are happening at once."

Gaius Valkland was dead. A hitherto unprecedented failure in the summoning rite had occurred. An unknown monster could possibly have been summoned. And now, the fire. Rolfe pondered over it all, and the answer surfaced in his mind.

Ridiculous. Could all this truly happen?

Like Celia said, too many things were happening at once, and there was only one plausible explanation. But it was one that didn't align with Rolfe's common sense.

"I have one hypothesis that might explain this situation. However..."

"You think it to be impossible?"

Celia correctly guessed at Rolfe's idea, and knew his reason for not saying it.

"I don't know... At least, not right now."

Rolfe turned his neck again, gazing at the soldiers busily inspecting the room. Ultimately, speculation was only speculation, and Rolfe wanted the cold, hard truth, not conjecture.

"We have a report!"

Their conversation was interrupted by the soldiers who had returned from their inspection.

"Yes, go ahead!"

"I've confirmed the rest of the soldiers are dead."

"And? What was the cause of their death?"

The soldiers exchanged looks at Celia's question. It seemed to be something hard to report.

"What's wrong? Speak clearly! What was their cause of death?"

Pressed by Celia for an answer, one of the soldiers spoke as a representative.

"I-It seems they were murdered with a man's bare hands..."

"What? Bare hands?! How can you be certain of that?" Rolfe asked back angrily.

Bare hands? So an unarmed man managed to kill those fully armed

soldiers and Sir Gaius? Inconceivable.

Rolfe could only imagine how difficult of a feat that was.

“One of the corpses seems to have had their throat crushed, but there are finger marks on the neck...”

“Finger marks...” Rolfe growled.

Rolfe ordered the soldiers take him to the corpse in question, and the two of them soon stood before the dead body. Its throat was indeed caved in.

“I see, those do look like finger marks...”

Rolfe didn’t object to Celia’s assertion.

“What about the other corpses?” He asked the soldiers.

“From what I’ve confirmed, this one had his neck bones broken from from a blow to the neck. The armor and helmet are intact, though, which leads me to believe no weapons were used. This one was likely killed by the assailant’s bare hands as well.”

And indeed, looking at the body, it did seem like it was dispatched by unarmed means.

“There’s another thing that bothers me...” Another soldier said timidly as the two glared at the corpse.

“What?! Be clear with it!” The normally calm Rolfe was unable to hide his irritation.

But that was only natural. This incident could shake the country, and there were few clues remaining.

“Yes, sir!” The soldier gave his report, shivering in fright of Rolfe’s anger. “This corpse we presume to be the otherworlder has its face burned off, and also has finger marks on its neck. And, erm... The belt for the body’s trousers is...”

“What?! Hurry up with it!”

“Yes, sir!” The soldier flinched at Celia’s annoyance. “The belt is missing! The trousers are slipping off the corpse. I cannot imagine him trying to fight in that manner...”

Hearing this, both Celia’s and Rolfe’s expressions changed, and they hurried to the corpse.

“He’s right...”

“They couldn’t possibly fight like this... So how?”

The corpse lying before them seemed to be properly dressed at a glance, but upon closer inspection, there were some discrepancies. In particular, the sleeves of the outfit were far too long. The cuff of his trousers was also too long for his legs, making it hard to believe he could walk in them without tripping. And the biggest issue, as the soldier said, was that the trousers were also loose.

Impossible. They wouldn’t be able to walk right in these.

At that moment, everything suddenly became clear to Rolfe, and Celia as well.

“Oh, no. Sir Rolfe, the soldier you sent to the infirmary! He’s the otherworlder!”

All the color draining from her face, Celia strengthened her legs with martial thaumaturgy and tore out of the room like a gust of wind.

“Put the castle on high alert! Understood? The enemy is disguised as a soldier. I don’t care if you have to arrest any suspicious-looking soldier you find.”

Giving his orders in rapid succession, Rolfe took after Celia, leaving the room behind him. After putting everything together, they realized everything that took place.

“The worst outcome truly has come to pass... Hopefully he is still here.” Rolfe called out to Celia, who was running ahead of him.

“Yes. For now, we should check the infirmary... But he’s probably gone by now.” Celia hastened her run with a bitter expression.

The terrible villain who slew her grandfather was right in front of her eyes, and she didn’t even notice. Rolfe could only guess at how frustrated she must have felt.

“In that case, the otherworlder had a means of fighting...” He said to her running back, between heavy breaths.

“Yes, and he was skilled enough to face four armed soldiers and a thaumaturgist on Grandfather’s level... It seems.”

“To have this much skill when he’s only just been summoned...” Celia’s answer sent shivers down his spine.

An otherworlder with this much power could be prowling the palace, and he harbored clear animosity towards the empire. The scars on Gaius’s corpse stood as proof of that hatred.

He’s a dangerous man, but we won’t let him get away. He’ll rue the day he foolishly dared to defy the empire.

“Orlando!” Celia shouted as soon as she caught sight of a young man, standing in charge of the soldiers cleaning up the mess.

“Celia, Sir Rolfe. Did word of the fire bring you here?” The young man turned to the sound of Celia’s voice with a surprised expression, and gestured towards the infirmary as he spoke. “In that case, do not worry. I’ve taken care of it. There is no danger of the fire spreading any further.”

“I can see that for myself.” Celia ignored Orlando, and proceeded to question him. “More importantly, I have something to ask you. There should have been a soldier carried into the infirmary just before the fire started. Where is he? Is Ronbert present? Can anyone here explain the situation?”

Celia’s question made Orlando’s speech trail off into stuttering. He was present here purely by coincidence, having just happened to be walking by the courtyard when he overheard the shouting about a

fire, which led him to rush over. He was not fully informed about the situation.

“W-Wait just a moment, Celia. I’m not following what is happening. Why are you in such a panic? It is very unlike you.”

Orlando could none too well hide his confusion at Celia’s uncharacteristic lack of calmness, but Celia herself didn’t seem to be in the right state of mind to answer Orlando’s question.

“Never mind.” Her thorny tone made it clear she’d given up on asking him. “Is there anyone here who *can* explain what is going on?”

Celia’s sharp gaze scanned over everyone present, but her question was succeeded only by a lengthy silence. Everyone seemed to stop working and looked away uncomfortably, trying to escape her gaze. For all they were concerned, they had only rushed over to help put out the fire.

Finally, one man’s voice disrupted the uncomfortable quiet.

“You’re quite right. That soldier you’re looking for was definitely here.”

It was a man dressed in white, bald at the very top of his head, with the hair surrounding his exposed scalp as white as snow. His unkempt, unshaven beard gave the impression of a sloppy person.

“Ronbert... There you are.”

The old man came out of the burned remains of the infirmary, reeking of alcohol as he advanced through the group of people to reach Celia. Under normal circumstances, she’d probably be criticizing him by now. Although he was quite skilled as a court physician, walking around the castle with the stench of alcohol about him was preposterous. But Celia swallowed the anger in her throat, for the flames of anger in his eyes riveted her in place.

“I just checked the infirmary, but that man’s long gone by now.” He said in a low, dark voice. “He probably managed to escape amidst the panic of the fire. If you’re going after him, best get a move on. He’s a dangerous man.”

His voice lacked all traces of his usual cheerfulness.

“There’s three corpses inside. Must’ve had some pretty impressive skill to kill ’em like that. Doesn’t seem like there’s any signs of hesitation, either.”

“Then, Alan...” Celia guessed at the reason for Ronbert’s anger.

“Yeah... His collarbone was smashed.”

Those words rendered everyone present speechless. Alan was Ronbert’s beloved son, who had been expecting a child of his own soon. Everyone who knew just how much Ronbert was looking forward to his first grandson struggled all the more to think of words of consolation. Out of everyone, though, Orlando was the only one who seemed incapable of picking up on the situation.

“Celia, what is going on here?! What is Sir Ronbert talking about? Who killed Alan?!”

Orlando had thought that everything was settling down now that the fire had been extinguished, so Celia and Ronbert’s words were all too unexpected to him.

“Orlando, go and gather the thaumaturgist unit at once.” Ignoring his inquiry, Celia started giving orders. “Sir Rolfe, please organize the imperial guard. I will go to His Grace and ask for permission to deploy the troops! We shall regroup at the courtyard.”

“Understood!”

“W-Wait, Celia, I have no idea what’s...”

Contrasted with Rolfe, who knew the situation well, Orlando asked for an explanation timidly, in fear of Celia’s anger.

“Never mind that, Sir Orlando! For the time being, abide by Lady Celia’s orders!”

“Please, Orlando, we don’t have time for this! He might get away!”

Orlando’s expression changed on hearing Rolfe and Celia’s words. Orlando Armstrum was a third-seat palace thaumaturgist, and a warrior who had lived through quite a few battlefields. Though he may have appeared unreliable at first glance, he had the right stuff when it came to handling these kinds of situations. Celia’s voice caused his mind to make the switch from peacetime to the battlefield.

“How many troops?” He asked in a deep, icy voice that didn’t seem to belong to the shaken man from earlier.

“As many as you can muster! The enemy is a dangerous man. We are in a state of emergency, so I approve the use of teleportation!”

Celia had given the thaumaturgists permission to make use of thaumaturgy which was forbidden in the castle. That was a prime indicator of just how pressing this emergency was.

“Acknowledged.” Nodding at Celia’s words, Orlando swiftly began to chant an incantation. “God of Light, Meneos. I invoke my contract with you, grant unto me speed to rival light itself.”

The next moment, he was transported to the front of the thaumaturgists’ barracks. The sight left Rolfe astonished.

“I would expect no less of a third-seat thaumaturgist. Being able to teleport with such a short incantation is most impressive.”

The greater the caster’s skill, the shorter their incantation could be. The fact that Orlando was capable of verbally abridging a spell as advanced as teleportation stood as evidence of his skill.

“Of course. He is Grandfather’s pupil, after all. It would be inexcusable for him to not have that sort of skill.”

Rolfe’s words made Celia’s hardened expression soften just a bit. She was pleased to hear her fellow student receive praise. But the next

moment, that emotion faded from Celia's mind.

"Sir Rolfe, we have to move. There's no time to waste." She raised her hand towards Rolfe. "I will use a spell to send you to the Imperial Guard's barracks. Please gather the troops."

"Understood. Go and gain His Grace's approval."

He may have been the captain of the royal guard, but he still could not deploy those forces without the Emperor's explicit approval.

"I will! God of Light, Meneos. I invoke my contract with you, grant unto this man speed to rival light itself."

After confirming Rolfe was gone, Celia recited yet another incantation, all to corner the shadow of that escaped killer.

When Celia teleported herself to the doors of the audience chamber, the guards turned their halberds menacingly in her direction.

"How dare you use teleportation within the castle's boundaries?!"

"Do you intend to spit in the face of national law?!"

Their shouts of anger lashed out against Celia.

"This is an emergency! I must relay the situation to His Grace!"

Celia ignored the guards' interrogation.

Realizing the assistant court thaumaturgist had teleported in, the guards standing at both sides of the doors leading to the audience chamber lowered their halberds respectfully. But along with their embarrassment at shouting at such a figure, their expressions were thick with confusion.

"It's you, Lady Celia. My apologies! But why did you teleport...?" One of the guards asked. "You're aware of the law, are you not? Did you do this with Sir Gaius's approval?"

Their confusion was plain to see. Usually, using thaumaturgy in the castle was forbidden, and its usage was hampered by a barrier set around the building. This special barrier prevented teleporting into the castle from the outside, and also weakened the use of thaumaturgy within the premises. As such, using it within the palace required performing a special ritual ahead of time, which was reserved for the court thaumaturgist and a handful of high ranking knights. It was an obvious measure they had to take in the name of security.

In addition, only the court thaumaturgist was allowed to use thaumaturgy within the palace itself, and even then, he was not permitted to use it freely. On the contrary, the law explicitly stated it could only be used in a state of utmost emergency; rare situations where lives were at risk.

That wasn't a law which could be easily broken, either. All those who broke it were sentenced to death, with very small exceptions. The guards' doubts were correct, but Celia didn't have the time to answer to them.

“Silence! I told you, this is urgent! We are wasting precious seconds here! If you will not open the door, I shall force it open with my spells!”

Celia’s eyes flickered in what bordered on madness. Her beloved grandfather’s death and her hatred towards his killer evaporated all traces of calmness from her heart. The court etiquette that was beaten into her since she was young were fading from her thoughts already. All that remained in her thoughts was the craving to corner and slay the killer.

“P-Please wait one moment, Lady Celia. We shall usher you in at once!”

Overwhelmed by Celia’s anger, the guard shivered as he nodded to his comrade, who moved back into the doors. They probably instinctively realized her resolve was true from her words and demeanor. It didn’t take ten seconds from when the guard went into the doors for them to silently swing open, this time to welcome her.

“What is the meaning of this, Celia Valkland?! How dare you show such disrespect before His Grace!”

As Celia entered the audience chamber, she was met with the angry shouting of the iron-blooded Prime Minister, Durnest.

Tch, the minister is here, too... I’m already short on time to explain things as it is... Celia clicked her tongue while thinking to herself.

This wasn’t something she could be happy about, given that every second counted. Prime Minister Durnest was a fiercely loyal aide to the Emperor, and a vassal with influence over O’ltormea’s fate, but he was also an extremely unreasonable man. His visage, especially over matters of upholding the law, was what earned him his reputation as a man of steel.

“Your silence tells us nothing. What even brought you here? What of Sir Gaius? It is the duty of the court thaumaturgist to come in case of trouble. Assistant court thaumaturgist, Celia Valkland! I order you by my authority as prime minister of this Empire, answer!”

His questions came in rapid succession, all of them obvious ones. But in a situation where every second counted, Durnest’s justified questions were nothing but a nuisance. However, there was one person in this room to whom Celia could not afford to show disrespect; the Emperor, seated on the Throne.

“Enough, Durnest. Celia asked for an audience with us in extreme urgency. Surely something unusual has happened.”

“But, Your Grace...” Durnest insisted that excusing her would not serve as a good example.

Durnest himself realized Celia’s actions likely had a reason behind them, but that was a different matter. He was a protector of the law, for better or for worse.

“Cease your obstinance.” The Emperor’s voice was cool and collected.

Even Durnest was incapable of protesting against that voice. The Emperor’s eyes narrowed, their gaze stabbing into him.

“As you wish, Your Grace. Please forgive my disrespect.”

Even the Prime Minister was incapable of going against the Emperor’s direct word. The current Emperor was more than just a nominal title for show. This man was the supreme ruler who had brought the center of the western continent to its knees by sheer strength, after all. Durnest lowered his head and took a step back, standing behind the throne. The will of the Emperor stood above all laws. That was both the strength and weakness of a despotic dictatorship.

“Good. Now, Celia Valkland. What brings you before me?”

As he spoke these words, a wave of pressure emanated from his body towards Celia. The pressure forced her to kneel.

Truly, one would expect no less of His Grace...

The First Emperor of the Empire of O’ltormea and the man known by the surrounding countries as the Lion Emperor— Lionel Eisenheit.

He was born the third prince of the old kingdom of O’ltormea, located in the mountain range in the center of the western continent. The old kingdom of O’ltormea had little territory and a struggling economy. In addition, the internal affairs of the kingdom were in a state of turmoil, and the power struggles between the nobles and the royal house had brought the country to the brink of decline. It seemed the fate of the kingdom would be to be absorbed by the surrounding countries.

But, lamenting the state of his country, young Lionel aspired to restore its strength. He won the succession wars, and through purging the opposing nobility, he restored power to the royal house. In the process, Lionel himself fought through many battles.

And forty years ago, with the invasion and takeover of the neighboring Kingdom of Thene, he changed the name of the country to the Empire of O’ltormea. Ever since then, he had been committed to fighting for sovereignty over the center of the continent.

Even at the age of 68, this Emperor, who had known the bloody battlefield, was covered in virile muscles and had enough strength to overwhelm most commanders in battle. Having slain many warriors and absorbed their prana over many years, he still boasted the strongest body in the Empire in terms of raw strength.

“Hmm. What is the matter, Celia?” Lionel slowly asked Celia, who hung her head. “I will not understand unless you speak. You wished for an urgent audience with me. You may answer me, promptly.”

His serene voice undid the pressure in her heart.

“Yes, Your Grace! I humbly request that you grant me command over the Imperial Guard!”

Steeling her resolve, Celia made her request, but her words were far too sudden and unexpected. Silence hung over the throne, as Lionel’s gaze remained fixated upon Celia’s face.

“What are you saying, Lady Celia?!” Durnest shouted, recovering from the shock. “An assistant court thaumaturgist asking for command over soldiers, and the Imperial Guard meant to protect the Emperor himself at that? Is Sir Gaius aware of this?!”

Silence reigned again. Durnest shouted, red in the face, demanding answers from Celia. His anger was justified; Celia held no such authority, though she was allowed to offer her opinion, as palace thaumaturgists also doubled as civil and staff officers. But that was only in the scope of verbal advice. She had no right whatsoever to command soldiers, much less the elite Imperial Guard stationed to defend the Emperor’s person.

“Command over the Imperial Guard, you say... very well.” Lionel’s voice, however, was calm in contrast to Durnest’s. “Depending on the reason, I may permit it. Use them as you will.”

“What... Your Grace! What are you saying?!”

“I said I see no reason to refuse, Durnest. Celia surely has a reason to come here bearing such a request.”

While Durnest argued vehemently, Lionel spoke with a strikingly calm tone.

“However, Celia, first you must present your reason. Why does a palace thaumaturgist require the soldiers? As Durnest asked, does Gaius know of your actions?”

That was a question which anyone without knowledge of the situation would be right to ask. Celia restrained the sorrow bubbling up in her heart to answer the Emperor’s question.

“My apologies, Your Grace. The truth is, Grandfather... excuse me, Gaius Valkland has been assassinated by someone.”

Her words echoed loudly through the audience chamber, and silence dominated, everyone seemingly forgetting to breathe for a moment. Her declaration left Lionel and Durnest beyond words. After all, Gaius was the greatest thaumaturgist in the empire, who stood at Durnest’s side in running O’ltormea’s internal, diplomatic and military affairs.

“I-It cannot be. Sir Gaius is... dead?”

“Impossible. It is impossible! Celia!”

Words of denial came from both of them in unison. The two of them could not believe her, for they knew of Gaius’s strength. Or perhaps their combined will was refusing to accept that their comrade, with whom they had shared their joys and sorrows since

youth, and who had supported their empire, was dead.

"I'm sad to say it is true, Your Grace... Gaius Valkland was assassinated."

Silence once again fell over the room, and Lionel was the first to break it.

"Why? Why was Gaius killed? Who could have... What happened?"

Celia could hear a low, heavy sound. Lionel was restraining his wrath, gripping the armrest of his throne tightly.

"There is much we do not know for certain yet. We do not have proof, nor witnesses. But we do know there is someone who could very well be the culprit, based on the circumstances."

"Who is it?"

The armrest screeched.

"Sir Gaius was scheduled to perform a summoning today. Since all the soldiers brought to guard the rite were also slain, it is safe to assume that the killer was the otherworlder he summoned."

"I-Impossible. I cannot believe it..." Durnest, who had remained silent for a long time, finally managed to speak.

They had summoned countless otherworlders before, and there had never been any problems until now.

"We've also discerned there is a high probability he is posing as one of the castle's soldiers. I realize how forward this is, but for the time being I had the captain of the Imperial Guard, Sir Rolfe, and third-seat palace thaumaturgist Orlando prepare their units to give chase. We're ready to begin pursuit as soon as you grant permission, Your Grace."

After hearing that much, Lionel was quick to give his decision.

"You have my permission! Writing a decree will take time, so take this sword as proof of my life and order!"

Having said this, the Emperor unsheathed the sword at his waist and threw it to Celia. This was the moment the Emperor himself recognized this situation as a state of emergency of the highest caliber.

"Celia. Gaius was my trusted confidant, a friend across decades, a teacher to me... And a pillar supporting my country."

Lionel's voice echoed at her back as she made her way out of the audience chamber.

"Yes, my Lord." She could only nod at his words.

Of course, unlike Celia, there was no blood relation between Gaius and the Emperor, but his words made it clear that there was a bond that transcended familial closeness between them.

Even the Emperor, who stands at the top of this country, laments his passing...

Those honest, guileless words made Celia understand just how

important her grandfather truly was.

“To think Gaius was assassinated... This is a declaration of war against the empire of O’ltormea itself. Find the culprit who did this and apprehend him, and if he cannot be restrained, you may end his life!”

Celia lowered her head deeply before the Emperor in respect and gratitude, then left the room. Lionel heaved a heavy sigh, and spoke to the curtain behind the throne.

“Shardina. Did you hear everything?”

“Yes, Father.”

The voice that answered Lionel’s call was that of a woman in her early twenties. She had golden, wavy hair that was tied together at its top and reached down to her waist. She was tall, but had a well-proportioned form. Most of all, she was a striking woman with the same blue eyes as the Emperor.



"I've only just received a report from my subordinates, as well. There's no mistaking that Sir Gaius is dead. A fire broke out in the infirmary at the same time, and a single soldier went missing as it happened. Lady Celia seems to be under the impression that the missing soldier in question is the otherworlder."

"I see... And what do you think, Shardina?"

"I believe her assertion about the culprit's identity is correct. If nothing else, I do not believe this is an assassination by one of the neighboring countries. However..."

"However, what?" Lionel's gaze bore into Shardina as she spoke in an elusive manner.

"I think her chances of apprehending the culprit are decidedly low." Shardina answered the question timidly.

"What?!" Durnest exclaimed in surprise. "Lady Shardina, are you claiming it's impossible for Lady Celia?!"

The Emperor himself had approved this order, but Shardina claimed it would be near impossible to apprehend the culprit.

"Sir Durnest, my claim does not stem from a lack of belief in Lady Celia's abilities." Shardina shook her head without flinching away from Durnest's red face. "Even if I myself were to take command, I believe the chances would be slim. In fact, I doubt anyone would succeed."

"Why?!" Durnest shouted, despite knowing how disrespectful it may have seemed.

"We do not know the face or age of the otherworlder, so how are we to capture him?"

"What? What do you mean?" Lionel raised his voice in surprise.

Celia hadn't taken into account that they did not know the killer's face. Without showing a hint of discomposure at her father's backwards glance, Shardina continued her explanation plainly.

"All the soldiers that were present in the summoning chamber under Sir Gaius's command were slain. When he was taken to the infirmary, he was under the guise of a soldier and did not remove his helmet, so no one confirmed his face. The soldiers who took him to the infirmary and the doctor present were likewise slain. As a result, no one knows what this man looks like. All we know is that he's a well-built young man."

O'tormea's capital city was a great city of unrivaled size in the western continent, as one would expect of a powerful empire. If the only description they had to go on was 'a well-built young man,' it would be hard to narrow that down to just one man in this sprawling city.

On top of that, forcing a blockade on such a large city was quite

difficult. If the neighboring countries learned that a single man slew a high ranking court thaumaturgist, it would leave a lasting scar on the nation's dignity.

"How dreadful..." Lionel groaned before the reality his beloved daughter had pointed out. "Then, how is Celia to track down the culprit?"

"It is a gamble, Your Grace. The fact the otherworlder is disguised as a soldier is good for us. We must interrogate any soldiers trying to switch out of uniform near the castle, or hurriedly trying to leave. Even if it is impossible, we may yet obtain some information. It is because Lady Celia understood this that she was in such a hurry."

Shardina's words made Lionel sink into his thoughts. Then, he spoke again in a low voice.

"I see. So there is a chance?"

"Yes. However..."

"Good! As long as we know that much. Shardina! You too are to take command of the knights and join the search."

Shardina was unable to hide her annoyance at Lionel's words. For all he was concerned, so long as the probability wasn't zero, that was enough.

"Y-Your Grace?" Durnest's face filled with suspense. "Is removing Princess Shardina from your presence wise?"

Shardina was charged with being the last line of defense to protect the Emperor. She had never, not once, been relieved of this duty. Durnest's concerns, then, were justified. The Empire of O'tormea became as grand as it was because it had brought its neighbors to submission by constant pressure and absorbed them as vassals. As such, there were still sparks of discord smoldering, both domestically and abroad. An assassin could make an attempt on the Emperor's life at any time.

"I said cease your obstinance, Durnest!" Lionel, however, cut down his concerns without mercy.

He then turned his gaze back to Shardina, and exclaimed loudly:

"Shardina Eisenheit, first princess of the Empire of O'tormea and captain of the Succubus Knights! Regroup with Celia and proceed with the search for the culprit!"

His sharp gaze stabbed into her. Lionel's eyes flickered with unwavering resolve, which could also be understood from the fact he called his daughter by her full name.

"As you wish, Father. I will do so to the best of my ability, however poor it may be."

Sensing her father the Emperor's will, Shardina lowered her head and left the audience chamber quietly.

That was the moment the Empire of O'tormea acknowledged

Ryoma Mikoshiha as its enemy.

At last, only the two of them remained in the audience chamber. After a long silence, Lionel spoke to Durnest, who stood at his side, with a tired voice.

“Things have become quite dire, Durnest.”

“Aye, Your Grace. We must resolve this situation before the surrounding countries learn of it.”

“Mm. And this happens just as we’ve gained control of the center of the continent, and are on the cusp of conquering the east.”

“Yes... It is regrettable. To think something like this would happen to Sir Gaius...”

Lionel shook his head slowly. Moreso than the setback of his path to conquest, the loss of his years-long vassal weighed on his heart heavily.

“We’ve no choice. Durnest, we must quickly elect a new court thaumaturgist. Summon the ministers.”

“As you wish. Will it be Lady Celia?” Durnest’s voice was thick with anxiety.

She had more than enough talent, and her loyalty and pedigree were without fault, but her lack of experience was overwhelming.

“Not much can be done about her youth... Except hope that what’s to come will help her mature.”

“Understood. I will go attend to the preparations at once, then.”

Durnest retreated, leaving Lionel alone on his throne.

“You fool, Gaius... Just when my domination is at hand...”

A single tear fell onto the red carpet. It contained all the emotions the man known as Lionel held for the one who had fought long through ruthless battles by his side.

Let us rewind time a bit. The injured soldier taken from the summoning chamber was, of course, Ryoma Mikoshiha. His gamble had paid off.

Of course, he was somewhat confident in his chances. Ryoma assumed that when the people who broke down the door were faced with the floor drenched in blood and the four corpses lying there, they would not be able to make calm calls of judgment. And he was right. Indeed, the soldiers who broke into the room were shaken by the gruesome sight.

Ryoma’s greatest concern was the possibility that they would remove his helmet and see his face, because if they were to do that, the soldiers would surely grow suspicious. After all, not one of them would recognize him. And even if he were fortunate enough to escape this place, having his face known would make his escape that much more difficult.

As a result, the man and woman who broke into the room having called each other by name was a godsend. Ryoma's calling that man by his name, Rolfe, lessened his suspicions, and led him to ordering to have Ryoma sent to the infirmary. That simple act of being called by his name deceived Rolfe into thinking the soldier before him was an ally, and he never dared to even think this was all part of Ryoma's ploy.

"Guh... Gaah... Guah..." Ryoma, lying on the stretcher, pretended to cough.

"Hey! Stay with us! We'll get you to the infirmary soon!"

"Yes, just keep it together a little longer! You hear me?! Stay conscious and don't you dare faint on us! You'll die!"

The soldiers carrying the stretcher talked on and on, trying to give Ryoma morale. They honestly and truly believed the man on the stretcher was an injured comrade on the verge of death.

Ryoma continued feigning his agony. He'd never really thought of being an actor, but desperate men with their back against the wall are capable of doing things they are usually incapable of doing. And right now, Ryoma was giving a truly Oscar-worthy performance as he pretended to be injured.

"Right, we made it!" A soldier called out and banged on the wooden door. "Doctor! This is urgent, please open the door!"

After a few moments, the door opened from the inside in a vigorous manner.

"Hey, Alan, they said it's urgent!" An old man shouted into the room while gripping the knob.

The stench of alcohol reached Ryoma's nose.

"I can hear them just fine without your shouting, Father! You two, place him on the bed there, quickly."

A young man in his late twenties promptly instructed them, as the old man left the infirmary, regarding him with a backwards glance.

"You too, Fath— Huh, Father? Where did he go?"

"The Head Physician's gone. Probably means to go drinking again." One of the soldiers said in an exasperated voice, watching the young man look around in confusion.

"Again? Whatever will I do with him..."

This was probably an ordinary occurrence. The young man wore a bitter smile.

"Come now, there's nothing to worry about." The soldiers exchanged glances upon seeing his expression. "The assistant head physician's skill is just as sound as his teacher's, ain't it?"

"No doubt about that. If anything, his hands don't start shaking when he sobers up, so he might even be better."

Saying that, one of the soldiers tapped Ryoma's helmet.

“Anyway, let’s check the patient... Hmm? This looks pretty bad.” Looking at Ryoma, the young man furrowed his brows.

His entire body was drenched in red, he reeked of the rusted, metallic scent of blood and was panting heavily. From the young doctor’s perspective, he looked severely injured.

“For now, let’s inspect his wounds. If you wouldn’t mind, could you take off the patient’s armor and helmet?”

At the young man’s request, the soldiers drew closer to the bed. That place would soon become their grave.

One of the soldiers suddenly collapsed on the spot, and red liquid spurted out of his neck vigorously. As he sat up, Ryoma lunged his sword forward, cutting the soldier across the neck. And as he hopped out of the bed, he pounced on the other soldier who stood there in shock. He had no way of avoiding an attack by the soldier he thought was writhing in agony just a moment ago. The soldier had no understanding of what was going on, and Ryoma’s sword slashed his throat without mercy.

“Wha...! What are you...?!” The young doctor shouted in surprise, and turned around towards the door, running away desperately.

He knew full well he wasn’t suited for fighting, so his immediate course of action was to take off and run. But that was the worst possible conclusion for Ryoma.

Dammit, if I let him get away, he’ll call for reinforcements!

Ryoma swiftly removed the scabbard from his waist and tossed it towards the young man’s feet. This wasn’t done as an attack, but to get his feet to trip for a moment and block his path of escape. And his attempt was successful. Fortunately for Ryoma, the scabbard hit the young man against the hip, making him lose balance just before he made it out.

Not letting the chance pass him by, Ryoma ran over to the collapsed doctor, and as he put his weight against his back, wrapped his thick hands around the young man’s neck. The young man was thin, and his body weighed several kilograms less than Ryoma’s. Despite this, he struggled wildly, feeling the danger to his life, but his futile scrambling only made Ryoma tighten the grip on his throat.

“L-Let go... Wh-Who are you...” The young man squeezed out the words painfully as his neck was being constricted.

“Sorry, pal. I’ve got some things I need you to tell me.”

Ryoma spoke brightly, but his vice grip on the young doctor’s neck never slackened in the slightest. He could strangle the life out of him or snap his neck with little to no effort. With Ryoma literally holding his life in his hands, the young man was left with no choice.

“What do you want to hear?” The young man’s voice was hoarse, due to the grip around his throat.

Still, his intent was clear enough. Ryoma spoke with the softest voice possible. He knew well enough that depending on the situation, speaking softly could be far more intimidating than shouting.

“Not much, I’m just looking to get out of this castle. Think you could point me in the right direction?”

Ryoma’s voice was perfectly casual, like he was asking for directions in the street. But that in itself made the young man more frightened.

“Who are you? Why did you kill them? Weren’t they your friends?”

From the young doctor’s perspective, that would be the natural conclusion. Only a few dozen seconds ago, the man before him was a gravely wounded patient. Ryoma, however, didn’t have the time to answer his questions.

“Yeah, sorry. I don’t like this any more than you, but you’re gonna have to answer my questions, and quick.” Ryoma whispered softly into his ears and tightened his grip.

“Gauh... Gugah...” The young man’s face gradually turned red.

“Feel like talking?”

The young man nodded desperately. If Ryoma were to keep strangling him like this, the man would die without a doubt. The fear of death made his resolve snap.

“Gho righ’ dow’ the khorridor, an’ akhross th’ ko’tya’t...”

“Go right down the corridor, and across the courtyard?”

Seeing him nod desperately, Ryoma tightened his grip on the young man’s neck further and further, strong enough to snap his neck...

Ryoma didn’t have the option of letting him stay alive. It didn’t matter how good of a person he was, or how harmless he looked. He couldn’t allow any witnesses if he wanted to escape this castle alive. The sole advantage Ryoma had in this utterly unfavorable situation was that the enemy had little to no information about him.

“Guah... Gaaaugh...” Gurgles and moans leaked from the young man’s mouth, and the blunt sound of his neck snapping echoed from between Ryoma’s hands.

Trying to push Ryoma’s body off to the best of his ability, the young man’s body then went completely limp. His muscles completely relaxed, and a putrid smell leaked from his crotch.

“Sorry.” Ryoma whispered to the corpse at his feet, after removing his hands from the young man’s throat.

That word was the only thing Ryoma could offer to the doctor who had believed him to be an ally, and was honestly worried for his well-being. Bringing his hands together before the corpse, Ryoma once again made preparations to run. Firstly, he searched the three corpses’

pockets, taking out their sacks of coins. Pouring them all into one sack, he tied it around his waist.

He then dipped a bandage into the hot water in the room and used it to wipe the blood off his armor. Walking around in bloodied armor would attract attention.

Right, I've got eight people's worth of money now. Guess these are gonna have to be my funds for the time being.

Having money on hand was important. Without that, he wouldn't be able to get too far in his escape. After reconfirming the weight of the sack at his waist, Ryoma tore the curtains and sheets away, as well as the cloths in the medicine cabinet, and lit everything in the infirmary on fire. Since he'd picked all the flammable things he could find, the fire spread swiftly through the room.

Right. This is the deciding moment.

Ryoma left the infirmary as it started billowing black smoke, and took a deep breath.

"Fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiire! There's a fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiire!" Ryoma's voice echoed through the castle.

One of the palace thaumaturgists, Orlando, was crossing the courtyard on his way back to his office from the barracks, when he heard the shouting.

"What?! A fire?!" The blood drained from his face the moment he heard it.

A fire in the castle was a serious crisis. If the home of the royalty and the center of government were to catch fire, it would leave a scar on the empire of O'lortmea itself. And besides that, the damage to property would be unimaginable. Most of the items in the castle were high class and expensive, and if there were damage done to the nobility, it could cause internal strife at worst. Even Orlando, who was seen as flippant and easygoing by his peers, realized the severity of the situation.

Orlando's nostrils then caught the whiff of a scent in the air. The flowerbed was rife with flowers blossoming proudly, releasing a fragrant aroma into the air. But within that was mixed a foul, burning aroma. And as he listened carefully, the shouting reached his ears again.

"It's a fire! A fire in the infirmary!"

"A fire? Where did you say it was?!"

"The infirmary's on fire! Get water, quickly!"

"No, call a palace thaumaturgist! They can put it out faster!"

"Don't be a fool! We must evacuate His Grace and the nobles first!"

Many soldiers, maids and butlers were working hard to put out the fire. They were all shouting and moving about frantically. Some

were trying to move valuables out of the way, a few were looking for a superior to give them their orders, and others were carrying buckets to extinguish the fire. It was a true crucible of disorder and chaos. And within that were nobles running away from the infirmary to the courtyard with their personal guards.

Realizing there really was a fire, Orlando broke into a run over the flowerbed. He felt some guilt at stomping over the diligently tended to flowers, but now wasn't the time to care about that. He cut through the flowerbed and made his way to the infirmary. He knew that once he got there, he'd be able to swiftly put out the fire. That thought dominated Orlando's heart.

And that was exactly why he failed to notice the sight of one suspicious soldier, mixed in with the rest of the nobles' guards, walking towards the exit and ignoring the fire and chaos behind him...

I should be able to get out as long as I just blend in with them...

That was a fortunate miscalculation on Ryoma's part, and he couldn't restrain the smile playing over his lips. He'd lit the fire hoping to sneak away in the chaos, but he didn't expect the nobles to dash for their lives like this. The sight of them all running for the gates reflected in Ryoma's eyes.

"Phew. Well, I've made it this far now..."

Blending in with the fleeing nobles, Ryoma evaded questioning from the guards and successfully slipped out of the castle. He then looked back, glaring up at the white castle he'd just managed to escape, the cold, dark flames of hatred burning in his eyes.

Chapter 2: Escape

By mixing in with the fleeing nobles, Ryoma successfully crossed through the castle gates. What spread out before him was a cityscape that felt like it was pulled out of medieval Europe. The castle was erected atop a small mountain, so the castle gates Ryoma was currently near were on top of a gentle incline that offered an unbroken view of the city below.

“Ooh! This is... impressive...” An amazed voice escaped his lips.

The cityscape before him was that orderly and organized. Firstly, the areas five hundred meters off from either side of the gates where Ryoma stood were lined with impressive houses, with gates of their own. The nobles fleeing the castle disappeared into those residences. This ward was probably populated by the nobility’s mansions.

Five hundred meters ahead of the gates, down the main road, was another set of gates. That was likely the sector where the commoners lived. The rooftops of the houses he could make out beyond the open gates in the distance were significantly smaller than the ones he saw before him.

For now I’m gonna need more information... plus a change of clothes.

Ryoma decided to start by trying to blend in with the commoners’ sector. He decided that finding a crowd to disappear into would be the correct course of action for now, and he would likely be able to gather the information he needed there.

Perhaps because he was dressed in a soldier’s attire, whenever he passed by some noble’s guard or an armored soldier, none of them seemed to spare a glance in his direction. But that wouldn’t work for long. They would trace the fire in the infirmary back to the soldier who had been carried in there sooner or later, and the armor would be the only evidence they had to seek Ryoma out with.

I’m not gonna be able to wear this armor forever.

Ryoma made way to the commoners’ sector, hoping to find clothes that would better allow him to blend in with people. Lowering his head at the gatekeeper, Ryoma crossed through with a rapid gait. The moment he crossed the second gate, Ryoma was hit with a kind of energy and liveliness the nobles’ sector lacked. Countless people passed in every direction, and there were many stalls and vendors around. Unlike the nobles’ sector, there was no paved road, but simply exposed earth, and the buildings were erected in a cluttered manner.

It was the very vision of a bustling marketplace. Ryoma looked around at the people's appearances. Many were dressed in robes and mantles. But looking more closely, some were dressed in armor, and others wore pants and shirts. One old lady had an apron on. There was a great variety in clothing depending on gender as well. In all likelihood, the former people Ryoma saw were travelers, while the latter were citizens of the capital.

"There's more people around here than I thought... A lot of them are armed, too..." Ryoma whispered to himself.

Many of those clad in armor were likely mercenaries hired by the country, because their equipment was simply too different from that of the soldiers. And to top it off, many of them had the kind of dangerous faces that made it painfully obvious they were criminals, most likely bandits and thieves.

"Yeah, this is definitely another world... Well, shit. I'm pretty far from happy about this."

Ryoma was certain the sight before his eyes wouldn't have been possible in any country on earth. White and yellow shades of hair and skin color adorned the various people walking by, in a medieval European-style city environment, clothed in a wide assortment of garments. Ryoma had no choice but to acknowledge he was in another world.

But I guess this won't make blending in a huge problem, at least.

Just the thought his hair and skin color wouldn't stand out was a soothing one. With such a lack of uniformity when it came to people's outside appearance, his black hair and eyes wouldn't pose a problem.

"Right, time to find some new threads..." Ryoma whispered to himself, when suddenly his empty stomach let out a contemptuous growl.

He'd been summoned to this world on his way to having lunch, so he hadn't eaten yet, and after that, he'd been so focused on escaping that he'd forgotten about his hunger.

Well, there's no going back there, so I'll just focus on finding clothes for now.

Just thinking about the boxed lunch he left behind in the summoning room made Ryoma salivate uncontrollably. He'd have to put acquiring new attire ahead of his empty stomach, though. The longer he stayed in this armor, the greater the possibility he might get caught would be.

Rubbing his stomach as it growled in dissatisfaction, Ryoma hastened his stride. As he walked down the main road, he looked around, and his gaze was drawn to a sign with a drawing of a dress on it.

That day, an odd customer visited Meg Resta's store. It must have been just after two in the afternoon when he walked in.

"Welcome!"

Meg greeted the customer with her usual widely beloved lively voice, but then saw the customer was a man clad in a soldier's armor. Of course, people coming in to shop with armor wasn't all that unusual, but a soldier going into the store in armor was a rare sight. Unlike adventurers and mercenaries, soldiers often went shopping in their normal attire.

Maybe he's here for some other reason?

Meg thought so, naturally enough, but judging from how the soldier examined the outfits on display, he certainly seemed to be interested in shopping.

"Are you looking for something? Do you need me to explain anything about our stock to you?" Meg worked up the courage to ask, despite eying the soldier suspiciously.

But as if to make a mockery of her resolve, the man responded in an all too ordinary voice.

"Yes, could you please get me a set of clothes I can use for an everyday outfit, along with some underwear, a robe with a hood, and a leather belt as well?"

He's pretty polite. Though, he is dressed in the imperial castle's armor...

The man's voice caused Meg to think something was strange. Most people who came to this store were arrogant and pompous, and that held especially strong for soldiers and nobles. Those working in the imperial castle were especially conscious of their status as elites and particularly selfish, which gave them a pretty bad reputation among the store's employees.

This store was set up on the main street, so its prices were naturally higher than their market value. Of course, those who frequented this store had more money to spend than most, and were prideful to match, regardless of their societal standing. But from where Ryoma was standing, he simply gave a normal, natural answer.

"Is there any particular color you would prefer?" Meg asked the man again, quieting her doubts.

"Black, please."

"Very well. Please wait, I'll have it prepared."

He wasn't all that different from any other customer. He told her what he needed, and the color he wanted. Sure, his politeness was a bit odd, but Meg had to laugh at all the undue concern she held over this.

Maybe he laundered his clothes and doesn't have anything else to wear? Oh, drat! I forgot to ask him for his size... Well, never mind. I'll just

bring over some large sizes.

As she pondered that, she brought over the clothes the man requested, each in three sizes. Incidentally, they all looked a bit plain but were well-tailored; they were the best clothes she had to offer that weren't aimed at nobles.

"Thank you for waiting. How about these?"

"They'll do well. Could you pack them for me?"

Huh? Isn't he going to check for their size?

Few people would buy clothes without trying them on first, and he didn't check to see if they were the right size. Meg tilted her head with obvious confusion.

"Erm... What about their size?" Meg asked with a reserved tone.

What a weird man... It's like he isn't actually interested in buying anything. Don't tell me he's a robber...?

The worst possible conclusion rose up in Meg's mind, but that concern seemed to be unfounded.

"Oh, my size... Just give me the largest one you have."

It seemed to be the kind of casual attitude that displayed a desire to finish shopping as quickly as possible. His attitude was certainly suspicious, but he seemed to be a paying customer. Meg swatted her apprehensions away.

"Very well, then. That comes to one silver coin. Please wait, I'll go wrap it." Meg said and bowed her head, heading behind the counter.

"Hey, wait a minute!" He said in a panic. "I'm kind of in a hurry, so I'll take them the way they are."

With that said, the man placed a silver coin over the clothes he bought.

"This is enough, right?"

His words made Meg eye him quizzically again.

Oh, he's just going to take them at that price? Maybe he's some noble's child. But why is he in a soldier's armor, then?

Few commoners wouldn't try to barter down a cost of one silver coin, and the prices were actually set with the idea that the customer would haggle for a lower one. The only ones who wouldn't seek a discount would be nobles obsessed with honor.

He certainly looks every bit like a noble, but the way he's paying... Perhaps he's the son of some noble traveling incognito? Well, I guess it doesn't matter, so long as he's paying!

Meg decided to stop thinking too hard about it. A paying customer, no matter how suspicious they may seem, is a good customer.

"Very well, you may take it as is." Lowering her head, Meg made her way to the counter.

Leaving the clothier's shop, Ryoma heaved a heavy sigh while

cautiously making sure no one noticed him.

“Phew... I got through that, somehow.”

It was just shopping, and he was no child, so he obviously had experience going to stores. But never before in Ryoma’s life had he been under so much stress in a store. But regardless of how he managed to do it, he’d done it just the same.

“Now it’s a race against the clock.” Whispering to himself, Ryoma made his way down the main road and outside the walls, to shake off his yet-unseen pursuers.

“Ma’aaaaaaaam, im’ma begging you, give me today’s special. Make it extra big, if ya please.”

Ryoma was now within an establishment in a dark alley on the other side of the main street. Its name was the Sea Rumble Parlor. It was the kind of store that was visibly attached to the city it was in, and didn’t serve first-time customers. But contrary to its dirty outwardly appearance, its insides were quite clean. It served men, women and those with children, and was quite the homely place.

It must have been just after three in the afternoon when Ryoma finally obtained his much anticipated lunch, clad in the black shirt and pants he’d bought from Meg’s store.

I made it in time, one way or another...

Ryoma recalled how, just as he returned from outside the walls, he passed by a small army and snuck a peek at their commanders. They were all on horseback, so there was only one objective they could have had.

Just like I figured, they came on horses... All I can hope is that they take the bait.

Ryoma left the capital while wearing his armor, to create the impression he’d escaped from the city. Normally, one wouldn’t bother coming back, and instead would run as far as they could. Ryoma, however, didn’t make that choice. Running away without a map and no proper equipment wouldn’t achieve anything, and wouldn’t get him anywhere. If he didn’t manage to gather some information regarding where he should go, how far it would be and how he should get there, leaving the city right now would be suicide.

Besides, Ryoma didn’t know how to ride a horse.

Just as most people in the modern world do not own horses, Ryoma had no experience riding on horseback. He’d seen carriages in the city, so he assumed his pursuers might use horses to go after him. With him on foot and them on horseback, they’d inevitably catch up to him.

That was why Ryoma had left the capital while wearing his armor. The empire’s men didn’t know Ryoma’s face, and their only

clue was that he was in armor, so if they heard an armored soldier left the walls, they'd have no choice but to go after him.

But since he'd read their actions so far, coming up with a countermeasure was easy. He was worried the enemy's preparations may have ended more swiftly than planned, but the heavens were on his side. He found a thicket of trees near the gates where he wouldn't be seen, then removed his armor and helmet, changing into his newly bought clothes. He buried his armor in the ground, and passed his pursuers just as he returned to the castle town.

Right... What's my next move?

He started formulating his plan for escape.

"Here you are, thanks for waiting!" A cheerful voice pulled Ryoma out of his sea of thoughts.

Placed on his table was a fairly large lunch, consisting of some kind of deep-fried meat served with sweet vinegar as the main dish, with fried white fish, a salad, and bread as side dishes. It smelled fantastic. Putting aside the question of what this meat used to be, the level of the food in this world didn't seem too bad.

With his appetite provoked, Ryoma's mouth overflowed with saliva. He swiftly tore off some of the bread and stuffed his cheeks with the deep-fried meat as he recalled the faces of his pursuers. Just as Ryoma had made his way back in through the gate and started looking for a place to eat, they had come from the castle's direction. Four men and women led the group; two among them were faces he already knew.

Rolfe and Celia, if I recall...

Rolfe had the appearance of a seasoned veteran, and Celia was a thaumaturgist with an air of cold intelligence. They were the two who charged into the room he had been summoned into.

And then there was a young man and woman I don't know...

First was the young man who seemed somewhat weak of heart. Ryoma didn't know his name. Ryoma thought he was dainty at first, until he noticed the cautious, sharp gaze he was scanning the surroundings with. That timid appearance was likely just acting.

Guess each and every one of them's a tricky bastard. But that woman was the real problem...

They were all skilled, and while Ryoma didn't look down on any of them, he wasn't scared of them either. But that woman was the only one among them Ryoma felt was legitimately dangerous.

That golden haired, blue-eyed woman. The moment Ryoma saw her, a jolt ran up his spine. The shape of her muscles, her posture, her gaze. Ryoma had years of experience in martial arts which afforded him the ability to be able to accurately discern another's skill level from the simplest of gestures.

But what was even more frightening than her skill and strength was the aura of a ruler she emitted. In chess terms, she was a Queen; a piece with the irreplaceable potential to decide a match. As strong as the other rooks may be, they couldn't compare to that difference in ability.

And besides that, her eyes... Those were more than just a warrior's eyes. They were...

Her eyes overflowed with intelligence and calmness. The atmosphere from her was similar to Celia, but with one decisive difference; confidence backed by experience. Her age wasn't much different from Celia's, but there was no doubt she was a mature commander.

Her gaze was that of someone who had survived countless battlefields, and in a different sense than Rolfe. Her eyes told of how she conquered those battlefields on a deeper level. She had not only the importance of the queen, but also the strength of a rook.

In Ryoma's eyes, she was the greatest nightmare he could encounter.

Dammit, I'll have to slip by that woman's gaze. Ryoma thought, as he chewed on the fried white fish. *Getting out of this country just became that much harder...*

That was Ryoma's first meeting with Shardina, the woman who would fight against him for sovereignty over the western continent.

"Go on, drink!"

With a cheerful voice, the Sea Rumble Parlor's owner, an amicable woman, placed two glass jugs in front of him. The bubbly, amber-colored liquid within them overflowed, staining the table.

"Um, I didn't order these...?" Ryoma looked back at the owner with surprise.

"Aw, no worries, it's on the house. Go ahead and drink up!" The woman pulled back the chair opposite Ryoma, sitting down and reaching for one of the mugs. Evidently, she'd brought out two with the intent of having one to herself.

"Haven't seen you before. You a traveler?" The owner asked casually, as her round face lit up with a friendly smile.

"You really don't have anything better to do right now, do you?" Ryoma asked the woman, as she flumped down in the seat next to him.

His words were steeped in caution. He didn't actually suspect this friendly owner, but the situation didn't allow for leisure. Being too cautious would likely invite suspicion, but he couldn't afford to let his guard down. Still, even after observing Ryoma's caution, the lady's expression didn't change.

"Take a look around you, dear. You're the only customer here."

Ryoma looked around as she instructed, and found that all the other customers had left some time since he'd come in.

"It's that time of the day. I usually close up the lunch menu at three and take a break, but you came in a bit before three, so I left the store open a bit longer." So said the owner, drinking from the mug in her hand in a lively manner. "Phew, that hit the spot. Nothin' like a pint after work, eh?"

Pleasantly wiping the foam from her lips with her sleeve, she gestured with her head to the back.

"The guys in the kitchen already went on ahead for their break, so all that's left is for me to clean up the store. I've got nothing to do but wait until you're done. Though, you can consider chatting with this old lady as your payment for the drink, if you want."

With that said, the old lady pushed the untouched mug in Ryoma's direction.

"I see. Sorry for being such a bother. I'll take you up on that." Ryoma lowered his head at the lady and reached for the mug.

The store was open, so Ryoma wasn't at fault for going in at the right moment. And still, acting like that was obvious would be haughty and inconsiderate. So Ryoma decided to show just that tiny bit of basic consideration. Ryoma knew one kind word was all it took to smooth out the conversation.

"No, don't let it bother you." Ryoma's attitude made the lady's smile deepen. "So, you a traveler?"

Well, I suppose I can indulge her. I gotta try to acquire some information and all.

The lady's tone was friendly and amicable; she was a genuine merchant, and it was clear she enjoyed talking. At any rate, Ryoma needed information more than anything right now.

"Yes, that's right. It's my first time around here..."

"Oh, is it now? So it's your first time to the capital and O'tormea. I don't know where you're from, but traveling alone must be hard, no?"

"No. I was traveling with my father, but... The other day, he passed away from a sudden illness..." Ryoma said and hung his head.

The lady must have thought she touched on something she shouldn't have, and spoke in a hurry.

"Aaah, bother, shouldn't have asked that..."

"It's all right." Ryoma raised his head and gave a weak, bitter smile. "It was all so sudden, I couldn't have done anything."

"I see... A sudden illness... What will you be doing next? Will you go back to your homeland?"

"I was thinking of taking up residence here in the capital. I was always wandering from place to place with my father on his journeys,

but maybe it's about time to settle down."

All right, now for the main topic. I should talk carefully so she doesn't get suspicious.

Ryoma patiently waited for a chance to fish out the information he needed, understanding that panicking the owner would just make her suspicious. She seemed to take Ryoma's story at face value. Her naturally friendly nature made her quick to trust others, and Ryoma's story was believable enough.

"I see... And what were your plans for making a living from now on?"

Yes!

Ryoma rejoiced; the topic he was waiting for came up. After all, even if this was another world, one still had to work to make a living, but an otherworlder like Ryoma had no idea what kind of professions were sought after in this world. This was also information that would be considered common sense, so depending on how he asked, it might draw suspicion to him, and since she knew his face, it put him at risk of exposing his face to the empire.

"Yeah, about that... I'd actually been helping my father with his work up until now, so I don't really know how to do much else... The most I can say is that I'm average with a sword."

"That right? Well, it's too late for you to start learning to be a craftsman or a merchant at your age." She nodded, taking a singular glance at Ryoma's face.

"So I can't be a merchant?"

"Never said you can't, it'd just be difficult. Those are professions you gotta learn from when you're a wee child. Besides, even if you can calculate money, I doubt people in the firm would hire someone without some kind of name for themselves."

"Really? Well, great, now what..." Ryoma feigned disappointment. He didn't actually want to become a merchant, of course.

Just like I figured, child labor is normal here. Figures, given the living standards in this world. But that limits my potential professions.

While escaping the castle, Ryoma saw the nobles using young children as servants and maids, and while looking around the city for a clothier he'd seen children roughly ten years of age working in front of the stores with work clothes.

From what he'd seen, the living standards in this world were overall lower than Japan's. If nothing else, the idea of sending children to school and educating them didn't quite exist here. Ryoma himself was knowledgeable enough, and believed that if only he were hired, he'd be able to produce results before long, but he wasn't immediately useful. If the age where workers started working was this low, it was doubtful any business would hire Ryoma, and he didn't

have the courage or desire to learn everything from scratch with those ten year olds, never mind how unnatural that would feel.

“You said you’re good with a sword, aren’t you?” The lady said, looking over Ryoma with mercy. “And look at that big body of yours. Why don’t you try your hand at being a mercenary or an adventurer?”

Those were the words he’d been waiting to hear.

“I suppose that would be my best choice... How do you start working as one of those, though?”

“What, don’t you know?”

“No, I’m not all familiar with it... Could you tell me, if you know anything?”

With a completely bothered expression and a polite tone, Ryoma undid any suspicion in her heart and made her want to help him.

“Well, I’m not exactly savvy about it. My store’s just affiliated with the guild. After nightfall, adventurers and mercenaries come to us for a drink.”

“Please, whatever you know will do.” Ryoma said, lowering his head.

“It’s really nothing big. You just go to the guild, have your personal information registered, and that’s that.”

“Hmm? I actually heard somewhere that they do background checks...”

That was what worried Ryoma the most. As an otherworlder, he wasn’t registered in this world’s census, and had no guarantors either. If they were to look into his background, Ryoma would be left essentially helpless, and his only remaining option would be to become a thief. But the lady’s response put his concerns to rest.

“They don’t have any background checks at the adventurers’ guild. You just go over there to them on your own and complete the registration procedures. You only need to have your background checked with a guarantor if you’re trying to become a merchant or craftsman, or when you’re trying out to be a soldier.”

Listening to the lady speak, finger resting against her chin, Ryoma’s face lit up with a smile. If what she said was true, finding work wouldn’t be that much of a problem.

“Really?! Oh, I’m glad I decided to ask you. I remember the last person I asked told me they require a background check! I really didn’t know what to do. But I guess they must have misremembered.”

As he spoke, Ryoma cheerfully downed his mug. The cool, amber-colored liquid quenched his dry throat.

“I’d bet they got it mixed up with the procedure for becoming a merchant or some such. By the way, to get to the guild, take the left alley to get to the main street, and it should be straight ahead.”

“Thanks a lot, ma’am! I think I’ll go there right now.”

“That so? Then promise you’ll come back to tell me how it went, and have some dinner while you’re at it.”

“Definitely! Can I have the bill, then?”

“Sure thing. Lunch for one is five coppers.”

“Right, five copper coins...” Ryoma rummaged through the sack on his waist, placing copper coins one by one. “Erm, sorry... This could take a minute...”

After placing three coins, his hand suddenly stopped.

Wait up... this is a good chance for me to figure out how much the money here is worth.

He certainly had enough copper coins. In fact, the bulk of the coins filling his sack were copper ones, and to be fair, he would have preferred to carry less of them if possible. But paying normally like this would be a wasted opportunity. Ryoma took a silver coin out of the sack and placed it in her hand. A gold coin would definitely come off as odd, after all.

“My, you don’t have any change?” The lady cocked an eyebrow, as Ryoma took back the copper coins and put the silver one in their place.

“I’m sorry, I’m out of coppers. Can you do with this?” Ryoma lowered his head apologetically.

“Hmm... Well, if you’re sure about it. But you should be careful. Even in the capital, there are stores that don’t give back change.”

So the owner said, and headed for the kitchen.

“There you are, ninety-five coppers in change. Make sure you count them properly.” She returned from the kitchen, placing them in groups of tens and a single line of five.

Their weight was apparent just from the sound they made, and judging from how she handled the situation, Ryoma also realized most people wouldn’t use silver coins to pay.

Well, I suspected as much, but I’ll have to get this money exchanged. It’ll be hard walking around with this much change on me.

Perhaps his thoughts were apparent in his expression, because the owner smiled wryly back at him.

“Don’t you have a card, dear? We’re affiliated with the guild, so you should use your card next time. The system’s only been around for a few years, and only other big cities like the capital adopted it too, so I guess it’s natural you don’t have one. It’s pretty convenient, though.”

Card? Like, a credit card?

The word felt too out of place. But not wanting to seem like he didn’t know, Ryoma played along.

“No, I actually just lost mine. Wasn’t sure what to do about it... I figured I’d be fine for a while since I have some money on me, but...”

“Oh, I see. Well, only the person registered on each card can use

it, so you shouldn't worry about your money. Why don't you head for the bank and have it reissued? You can do that on the way to the guild."

The bank, huh? So they have those in this world...

"Don't they need proof of identity to reissue it for you?" Ryoma asked, just to be on the safe side.

"They don't. Just like when they first issue it, they just ask for your physical details and make it right away."

"Oh, really? I didn't know. Thank you, you've really been a great help!" Ryoma said, lowering his head to the lady again.

"Don't worry about it, dear! Come over for another bite sometime!"

Parting with the owner, Ryoma made his way outside the store to the main street. Just as he'd been told in the Sea Rumble Parlor, he took a turn at the alley to go out into the main street, until he saw two buildings come into view. One was marked with a sign showing a sack full of coins, and the other was marked with a sign showing a soldier clad in armor.

Those are pretty simple-looking signs... I guess this just shows the rate of literacy around here is low... Well, whatever. I just have to deposit this haul.

With that in mind, Ryoma walked into the bank. Eight sacks' worth of money was actually rather heavy to carry around. He didn't know if the gold coins were real gold, but the silver coins on their own felt around fifty grams in weight, which meant several dozen of them would come to over 500 grams. And the gold coins, which he had the smallest number of, likely weighed the same in total. Adding the silver and copper coins to that, he was walking around with almost certainly five or six kilograms of coins.

I guess it was natural for the old man, but even the soldiers had quite a bit of money on them, so I guess I lucked out there... Still, this is pretty heavy.

It had a certain weight in his hands, which gave him a feeling of security, but on the other hand, it was a definite burden. Ryoma wanted to unload as much unneeded weight as he could, considering he was being actively pursued.

"Welcome. How may I help you today?"

Ryoma crossed through the bank's entrance, and upon entering the lobby he was greeted by a middle-aged man. It felt very much like he'd went into a regular Japanese bank. The man was dressed in black from top to bottom with a lace blouse, and wore a red bolo tie around his neck.

A suit? Why's he wearing a suit?

The more Ryoma saw of this world, the less he seemed to

understand it. At first he had thought it to be like medieval Europe, but there were also some oddly modern aspects to it. The mention of the card and this man's suit were prime examples.

It's like a hodgepodge mix of both completely different and utterly familiar things...

"Um, excuse me, sir...?" The man asked, flinching slightly at Ryoma's gaze.

"Oh, sorry. It's just my first time around here... I'd like to open an account, please."

The man nodded graciously at Ryoma's words and beckoned him inside. Evidently things like teller windows were just as needlessly complicated in this world, too.

"Over here, sir."

"Thank you."

"He's here to open an account. Please handle the rest."

The man simply gave those instructions to the girl at the teller window, and then left.

"Welcome, sir. You wish to open an account, correct?"

The teller girl sitting behind the counter regarding Ryoma with a smile wore a deep blue jacket and a red ribbon. It truly did feel like the kind of welcome a receptionist would give, which would have been perfectly normal... had he not been in another world, that is.

"Yes, it's my first time here, so I'm not really sure what to do. Thank you." Bowing his head politely, Ryoma sat in the chair opposite from her.

One good aspect to Ryoma's personality was being able to ask for help when he needed it. It was a much safer bet than pretending to be knowledgeable about things he didn't have the foggiest clue about.

"Very well. Could you please write your name down here, sir?" The teller girl said, taking out a piece of parchment-like paper and a pen.

Well, it certainly doesn't look like real paper... So I guess it's parchment?

Stifling his curiosity, Ryoma took the pen and parchment.

Name: Ryoma Mikoshiba

Age: 16

He filled out his name and age without thinking about it too deeply, and left the address column empty. It was when he returned the parchment to the teller girl that Ryoma realized something.

Wait, what I just wrote... Was that Japanese? What did I write in there? I did write my name down, didn't I?

Nonetheless, the girl was still working without paying it any heed.

If nothing else, she seemed to have made sense of what he wrote.

“So you’re Mr. Ryoma Mikoshiba, sixteen years of age. Is this information correct?”

The teller girl directed a probing expression at Ryoma’s face. Perhaps Ryoma didn’t look to be sixteen years old to her, because she was looking up at him suspiciously.

“Yes. I guess I don’t look like it?”

Ryoma was so used to people being surprised at his age that it didn’t even annoy him anymore.

Yeah, yeah, I know, I look old...

He’d intended to write his name down in Japanese, but the letters on the parchment were unfamiliar. Ryoma didn’t understand the logic behind it, but the teller girl accepted his form, so he decided now wasn’t the time to question the subtleties.

“Actually, is sixteen too young to open an account?” Ryoma asked calmly.

That was the scariest possibility to him, but the teller girl shook her head.

“Oh, not at all, your age won’t be a problem. It’s just... you’re very mature and calm, sir, so your age came as a bit of a surprise. I must apologize for coming off as rude.”

Ryoma couldn’t honestly say he felt satisfied at that, but people believing him to be older than he was from his appearance was par for the course anyway.

“Oh.” He smiled calmly at the teller girl. “It’s fine, I get that a lot. So, could you open my account?”

“Of course. Please wait a moment while I make your card.” She said, and began to write something on a piece of paper roughly the size of a business card.

She then placed the card between two transparent sheets and used what looked like an iron to crimp them together.

Is she laminating it?

It looked strikingly close to a driving license or an employee ID. Ryoma couldn’t tell if the living standards in this world were high or low at this point. They most likely had science similar to his own world.

“Thank you for waiting. Please place your hand on this orb.”

She placed the card into a slot at the bottom of a pedestal with a glass orb on it, and pushed it toward Ryoma.

“Like this?” Ryoma placed his hand on the orb, and the moment he did, it began to glow.

“Yes, that’s good. Your personal information is now registered on this card, Mr. Mikoshiba. Should you lose your card, go to any nearby bank and they will reissue it for you.”

After the orb finished glowing, she extracted the card and handed it over to Ryoma.

“It’s done already?”

“Yes, your account has been opened. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

It had ended so quickly that it almost felt anti-climactic to Ryoma. At any rate, opening the account was secondary to the main reason he had come here.

“In that case, yes. I’d like to make a deposit to my account.”

Ryoma said, placing his bag of coins on the counter.

“A deposit, yes? Thank you very much. Place the coins here, and insert your account card into the slot.”

She then placed what appeared to be an electronic scale in front of Ryoma. He followed her instructions without a word, placing the sack on the scale.

“Yes, that’s perfect. The money seems to be in order. I’ll confirm the sum, then.” The teller began counting the coins and sorting them into groups of ten.

I see... So the scales are to ensure the coins aren’t counterfeit. That’s convenient... Though she still has to actually count them by hand.

So they had cards in this world, but no machines that could automatically count coins. The teller girl continued piling up the mountain of coins, unaware of Ryoma’s internal complaints. This took her about twenty minutes. After double-checking the coins three times, she turned to him again with a bright smile.

“Thank you for waiting. The total sum is three gold coins, 54 silver coins, and 735 copper coins. You’d like to deposit this in full, correct?”

Lunch at the Sea Rumble Parlor was five coppers, right? And silver coins are worth one hundred coppers, so... that’s quite a bit of money for now.

Apparently the soldiers he slew were skeptical of the card system, but thanks to them carrying their money on their person, Ryoma wouldn’t have to worry about being able to eat for the time being.

“Yes, please go ahead.”

“Very well, I’ll deposit that at once.”

With that said, the teller girl placed his card on the change plate and bowed her head to Ryoma.

Phew, looks like I’m done with the bank for now. Now I just need to go and register at the guild.

He’d deposited and confirmed his living expenses, but he still needed to work for a living. Ryoma left the bank and went straight into the building next door.

Beyond the door were counters manned by receptionists. In terms

of structure, it wasn't much different from the bank. Ryoma took a seat at an empty counter.

"Welcome, sir. How may I help you today?"

The receptionist girl here was also clad in a uniform.

"I'd like to register as an adventurer and look for work, please."

"Very well. If you don't mind me asking, do you have a bank account?"

"An account? Will this do?"

Ryoma handed over his newly-issued card.

"Yes, that's fine. We've recently begun paying using the bank cards, so we request that all new applicants open a bank account."

"Oh, is that right? Guess I lucked out, I heard I wouldn't need to have anything prepared to register with you." Ryoma smiled wryly, and the receptionist replied with a forced smile.

"Yes, some people can't wait and come right over to us. We have to ask those individuals to return after they take care of that."

With that said, she inserted his card into a slot on another pedestal adorned by a glass orb.

"There. Your registration is now complete, Mr. Mikoshiba."

"Huh?" He blurted out.

Ryoma was not expecting to be called by name here, so his guard went up instantly.

"Cards from the bank share information with guild registrations. So if you have a bank card, we can expedite the registration process by reading information relevant to us."

With that said, she took out a bunch of papers, or at least, sheets which *looked* like papers, and began reading through them.

They share information with each other? Or, well, I guess they're companies under the same enterprise...

Compared to what Ryoma saw outside this building, this all felt all too foreign. Both the bank and this organization called the guild employed technology that was far too advanced, and the management at both establishments seemed far too refined.

"Hmm, you're going to be accepting quests while you're here too, correct?" The clerk's words pulled Ryoma out of his thoughts.

"Ah, yes."

"Are you familiar with the guild's system?"

Ryoma gave an honest shake of his head.

"Then let's go over it. Feel free to ask if there's anything you don't understand." She said, spreading out the sheets in front of Ryoma.

"First, about our guild. It is comprised by what were originally two separate organizations, the adventurer's guild and the mercenary's guild. The two merged to form our current organization. We are a large scale organization with branches throughout the

continent, so whenever you hear the term ‘guild,’ it will most likely refer to us.”

The clerk beamed with pride. It seemed that from her perspective, the guild was like a massive conglomerate in the terms of Ryoma’s old world.

“Next, about the card. Please look here.” As the clerk spoke, she pulled the card out of the pedestal and handed it over to Ryoma.

It had information written on it that hadn’t been there when he’d first received it in the bank.

“Its initial state immediately after registration is Level 0. Your guild rank is F, the lowest rank. You will find your rank is displayed on your card. It also doubles as your identification within the guild, so make sure not to misplace or damage it.”

She then flipped a few of the sheets over, and pointed at a column of text that said F near the bottom.

“Simply put, your level translates to your combat experience, and your guild rank translates to how many quests, i.e. requests, you’ve accepted and completed for the guild. Incidentally, your combat experience refers to the total amount of life force you’ve absorbed from living beings. You know about power absorption, right?”

“Yes. When you kill another living being, you absorb a fraction of its power, right?”

“Exactly. It’s said that if level 0 is the average strength of a human, level 1 translates to having twice that strength. Of course, age and gender can factor into this, so it’s not as simple to calculate as it may seem. Also, it doesn’t influence your pay as an adventurer, but it can affect your pay as a mercenary.”

“I see. So if I’m at level 10, I’d get paid as much as ten people?”

In layman’s terms, it would come down to that. But the clerk smiled softly and shook her head.

“Fundamentally speaking, you’re not wrong, but I’ll spare you the details and simply say the highest level achievable by a human being is 7, and there’s only one person in recorded history to have gone that high.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean...?” Ryoma furrowed his brow at the clerk’s words.

I’m not wrong, ‘fundamentally speaking’...? What’s she talking about? Plus, seven’s kind of an odd number to cap the levels at...

The clerk didn’t answer his doubts, though.

“There’s no need for a beginner to worry about that. For the time being, it’s fine as long as you understand that you need to absorb prana and strengthen yourself. You can confirm the rest of the details with any nearby staff once you reach level 1.”

Her smile was gentle, but her attitude was obstinate. The clerk

was not intending to answer Ryoma's doubts. Seeing him nod reluctantly, she continued her explanation.

"Now, about your guild rank. Each time you accept and complete requests, you're given points, and once you cross a certain point threshold your rank will increase. Once your rank is higher, you can accept more lucrative requests. However, you can only take work at the same rank as yours or lower."

"What about this warning?" Ryoma glanced at a line of warning text written on the page.

"Yes, about that. You may accept multiple requests, but they are time-limited. Not completing a request within its fixed date may incur reparations on you and lower your points."

"So it can lower my rank?"

"Correct. Your rank advances for every one hundred points you accumulate. But there have been cases where adventurers increased their rank and failed a mission immediately after, resulting in their rank being reduced. However..."

The clerk's finger then pointed at a disclaimer written on the page.

"If the request's conditions or contents are found to have been inaccurate or wrong, leaving you unable to complete the request, no reparations will be imposed on you, and depending on the situation, the requester may have to pay a fine. If that happens, inform the guild and it will be taken care of."

It seemed the conditions behind the request were decided meticulously.

This almost feels like temp work...

The clerk's explanation gave Ryoma the image of a temporary personnel business. He'd only seen them on the news and the Internet, but the idea sounded close enough. The idea of the guild being an employment office and the adventurers being temporary employees was easy enough to understand.

"At any rate, this concludes the explanation. Is there anything you need more information on?"

Well, there is that part she left out... But if she's not willing to tell, I guess I can't force her. I guess I'll just follow her advice and get to level 1 first.

"No, there's nothing." Stifling his doubts, Ryoma shook his head.

Understanding everything just from this explanation would be difficult, but he was doubtful he'd get an answer to all his questions right now, and he didn't have any time to squander on these doubts. He'd just have to fly by the seat of his pants and figure things out as he went along.

"In that case, please select your first job, Mr. Mikoshiba."

The clerk pulled out a stack of sheets from her drawer again, placing them in front of Ryoma. The rank was listed at the very top, and underneath that were countless jobs.

“So, what sort of requests are you looking for, Mr. Mikoshiba? An adventurer or a mercenary?”

“I could go either way, honestly...”

This almost feels like an interview...

Ryoma remembered going on a recommendation interview during his high school admission exams. It felt the same as when he was asked about his plans for the future.

“Hmm. If you’re confident in your combat skills, then maybe going for mercenary work would be ideal.” The clerk said, circling a few columns in red.

“I just circled jobs that require combat skills, such as killing wild dogs and wild bees. Since they’re jobs aimed at newcomers, they don’t have a time limit. You’ll receive the reward upon completion; three copper coins for every kill. You’ll also gain one point per kill as well.”

Looking over the circled jobs, Ryoma decided to ask if the kind of work he was looking for was available, like escorting someone to another place or carrying supplies.

“Is there any work that involves going to other towns?”

“Other towns? So, deliveries, then. Unfortunately, you can’t accept bodyguard work at rank F.”

Ryoma hung his shoulders in disappointment.

“Bodyguard work relates directly to the safety of the requester’s life and property, so the guild prefers to only send those with abilities at a certain standard, and those it trusts have proven themselves dependable. To be exact, you would have to be at rank C or above.”

“Abilities and trust...”

“Yes, it takes more to be a bodyguard than mere strength. Of course, strength is quite important, but one must also be attuned to one’s surroundings and able to pick up anything out of the ordinary. Not to mention being able to defend the requester and their goods from bandit attacks. But the most important thing of all is trust. If the bodyguard turned out to be a plant by the bandits, the consequences would be quite grim.”

“Then, when it comes to delivery work, could I take any of that work if it involves leaving the country?”

The clerk had explained everything perfectly, and Ryoma couldn’t think of any way to argue against it, but he wasn’t going to back down without trying, either.

“Unfortunately, that sort of delivery work is not available for those at rank F either. The most you are able to accept is deliveries to nearby towns.”

Unlike video games, this world had a lot of limitations on which jobs one could take. Ryoma's glance then settled on a map which hung on the wall behind the counter.

"Are there any delivery jobs in those neighboring towns?"

"I believe there would be; it is delivery work, after all."

"Hmm. If you wouldn't mind, do you have any spare maps?"

The clerk regarded Ryoma with a suspicious glance, before taking a folded map from the drawer and placing it on the counter.

"Erm... Where's O'tormea on the map?"

"The capital O'tormea is over here."

Her thin white finger pointed at a specific spot between the center and south of the map. Right next to her finger, the words 'The capital O'tormea' were written in black letters. There was also a red line separating the center from the southern sections of the map. That red line probably represented the boundaries of the empire of O'tormea. It was fairly wide.

Gharic, Melpheren, Girdas, Auiet... If I'm going anywhere, it should be one of those towns...

Ryoma's eyes were drawn to the four towns surrounding the capital. They were all a short distance away.

"Are there any delivery jobs to Melpheren?"

"Let me see..." The clerk examined the paper in her hands. "This one isn't the right rank for you... This one's already been taken by someone... Ah, here we are! Delivering a letter. The reward is 30 copper coins, and it will increase your rank by five points."

It seemed there wasn't much work Ryoma could take as a beginner, especially ones where the recipient was in another city. Work wasn't always readily available, and sometimes others might take it ahead of him. Ryoma was lucky, though. He looked at the clerk, who was flipping through the pages, with a smile.

"I'll take that one."

Ryoma immediately took the job. Being decisive could mean everything in these situations, and he didn't have time to hesitate.

"Very well, I'll put you in for it... I'll just need your card for a moment."

She began to seemingly type something into a glass pane attached to the glass-orbed pedestal, and then inserted Ryoma's card into the slot. The glass sphere flickered for a moment. This equipment evidently operated much like a PC which would input the required information into the card.

"Right, all done. You have a three day limit for completing this task. Bring the letter to Melpheren's guild to confirm your completion. Are there any other jobs you'd like to take?"

"Yeah, I'd like to take all those hunting jobs you mentioned

earlier.”

“Very well. Those would be hunting wild dogs, wild bees and wild rabbits. These have no time limit, so you can report the completion to whichever guild is nearest to you.”

“Understood.”

“Oh, right. I’d almost forgotten about this, but if it’s not specified which branch you should report to, it means you can report a request to any guild branch. I wish you good luck in your endeavors.” The clerk gave Ryoma an encouraging smile and bowed her head.

“Yes, thank you very much.” Bowing his head in return, Ryoma made his way out of the guild.

Ryoma had a reason for accepting those requests. He was being pursued by the Empire, and so he needed to get out of the country. But there was one problem regarding that. His pursuers would know of his intent to escape, and there was a chance he would be questioned if he were to hurry to the road now.

So he sought a reason to leave the capital, and the job of delivering that letter happened to be rather convenient.

And there was also a reason he chose to go to Melpheren, in the east. According to the map from the guild, the capital sat in the southeastern side of the Empire’s territories. In other words, the border to the north and west would take days to reach. The southern border was closest to the capital, but his pursuers were commanded by a wise woman. There was a high chance she would set a trap for Ryoma.

So after weighing his options, Ryoma decided it would be safer to head for the second closest border, to the east. Of course, there was no telling whether his judgment would prove correct until he went there...

Having completed his business at the guild, Ryoma went to the Sea Rumble Parlor as promised, to inform the owner that he had completed his registration.

“Ah, it’s you. Did you register with them?”

Gesturing for Ryoma to come to the counter, she handed him a glass of water and asked happily. The time was just after five in the evening, and since it was a touch too soon for dinner, there were hardly any customers in the store left.

“Yes. I’m glad I asked you about that.” Ryoma answered with a grin.

“That right? My, that’s just lovely, then. It was worth helping you out, then... Incidentally, how about dinner? It hasn’t been that long since you had lunch.” She cast her gaze at the clock on the wall. Opening his account at the bank and registering at the guild hadn’t actually taken that long, and even Ryoma, who boasted a relatively

large physique, couldn't do dinner just two hours after lunch.

"Eeeh, yeah, I think I'll have to pass on that..." Ryoma rubbed his belly for emphasis.

His stomach was still holding that fried chicken and fish captive with elation.

"Yeah, I figured as much." She said, as her gaze was drawn to Ryoma's outfit.

There was apparently something wrong with his clothes.

"Speaking of, dear, did you leave your luggage at your room in the inn?"

"Huh? No, I don't really have..."

"Eh? You intend to go adventuring in that getup? What about your luggage? You don't even have a weapon."

It seemed most adventurers carried their belongings on their person. It was safer than leaving any high value items in the inn, and made it easier to react to unexpected situations. Even commoner peasants and merchants carried at least a sword while traveling the highways. It was natural for the owner to be surprised, then.

Ryoma glanced at his outfit; a shirt, pants and a cloak. It looked like a common outfit... At least, within the city.

I see... I would have done it bare-handed, but that's probably not a good idea. And she mentioned luggage, too. I won't need to prepare to camp out since it's just half a day to the neighboring town, but I'll need to make preparations... Doubt I'll find any convenience stores out there, after all.

Fundamentally speaking, Ryoma didn't intend to carry a weapon. Even for mere self-defense purposes, holding a weapon was extremely incriminating. Getting off with just an excessive self-defense charge would be a lucky break. At worst, one could find themselves charged with assault or murder.

All that only applied to Japan, though. In this other world, not walking around with a weapon was seen as strange.

"Oh, I thought I'd go check up on weapons later. I didn't carry much to begin with, and all the requests I took were near the city, so I figured I could do without preparing too much..."

"Well, you're a beginner, so it's only natural you'd think that." Hearing his words, the woman seemed convinced somehow.

"Was that wrong?"

"Adventurer work is dangerous, don't you know?" She said with a sigh. "Do you know what the prime reason for adventurers and mercenaries dying is?"

"What?"

"Getting killed by a weaker opponent due to lack of attention or preparation... Low rank requests aren't hard, true, and depending on

the request, even women and children can do them. But there's no telling what might happen outside town. You should prepare for the worst case scenario... if you don't want to die, that is."

The owner's words made Ryoma sink into thought.

I'm acting like I'm still in Japan... She's right! I don't know this world yet. Plus, I'm being pursued by the Empire. There's really no telling what might happen next, and I'm being so careless... Her concern makes perfect sense...

"I'm sorry, madam. I guess I wasn't as prepared as I thought."

Ryoma lowered his head to thank her for the considerate warning.

"Oh, no, it's fine! See, my store serves the people who live around here in the afternoons, but during the night we're open as a tavern for adventurers and mercenaries, so I've seen a whole lot of adventurers. And let me tell you, I've seen plenty who came to tell me they were going off on some adventure, but never came back. And when I asked their comrades who had survived, it turned out they died close to town, since they forgot to take antidotes or didn't pack enough medicine... So I thought I'd warn you." She said, wiping her tears on her apron.

She'd seen plenty of adventurers come and go, and it was apparent she was warning him out of her own milk of human kindness.

I don't know anything yet, so I'll have to pay heed to her warning. I can't afford to die in this world.

"I have time, so I'll go make preparations and come back for dinner after that."

"Oh, are you now..." The lady brightened up at Ryoma's words. "I think that's a good idea. Do you know where the stores are? The tool shop is on the main road, after the guild. The pharmacy's next to that. I'd stock up on medicine if you can afford it. And for the weapons shop, take a right from here and go straight. Tell the old man there that the owner of the Sea Rumble Parlor sent you, and he'll treat you nice."

Spurred by the almost motherly kindness of the owner, Ryoma left the store, in search of a weapon he could entrust his life to.

Soon, he found the weapon store the Sea Rumble Parlor's owner had recommended. The exterior was a bit dirty, but the front of the store was rather large. At the rear of the store was a large chimney that billowed black smoke.

"Hey, ya lookin' for somethin'?"

As Ryoma entered the store and examined the spears and swords on display, a bearded old man called out to him.

"Um, a convenient weapon, I guess..."

Ryoma's words didn't have any ill intent. He honestly meant that he wanted to find and buy a weapon he could handle, hence 'convenient.' But as soon as the words left his mouth, the shopkeeper's expression changed instantly.

"None of the weapons I made or picked for me inventory are 'convenient,' ya duuuuunce! Now scamper off!" His shout echoed through the store.

Ryoma was twice this small's man size, but still found himself overwhelmed by his outburst.

"Aaah, I'm, uhh, I'm sorry. They told me to come here from the Sea Rumble Parlor..."

Upon hearing Ryoma's hesitant words, the old man's expression softened a bit.

"Well, why didn't ya say so sooner? The Sea Rumble Parlor's missus sent you over, did she?"

"Y-Yes!"

"So, you a beginner? Nah... But really, you're a novice with that mug?" He asked, eying Ryoma suspiciously.

True, Ryoma's physique was quite large and his face made him seem older than he was. Most people would be hard pressed to believe he was a novice. But Ryoma merely confirmed the old man's words without panicking. Having people doubt his age was a common occurrence.

"Yes, I just registered at the guild today."

Perhaps finding how instantly Ryoma answered to be convincing, the shopkeeper folded his hands and nodded grandly. His arms were blemished with countless burn marks, likely inflicted by embers during weapon crafting. Those burns stood as evidence of him being an experienced craftsman.

"I getcha. Well, I guess that's how it is. But that said, tyro! I don't give two ticks about what you say in other stores, but don't ever say somethin' as vague as 'convenient' in me store!"

"Are people who make their weapons by forging rare?" Ryoma asked, taking a dagger displayed nearby.

"You! You can tell?!" That question made the old man's expression swiftly change.

"Yeah, more or less."

As the shopkeeper's voice filled with astonishment, Ryoma examined the blade of the dagger in his hand. It had a polish and straightness to it which clearly showed it had been hammered time and again to remove all imperfections and nooks.

"Oh, ya do! That's just swell. Recently most smithies round here been mass producin' their weapons by casting, and most adventurers think that's good enough! Casting's just pouring metal into a mold, ya

can't make good weapons with that!"

Ryoma could clearly see the shopkeeper's pride as a craftsman at work. This was probably why the sound of the word 'convenient' annoyed him to the point of shouting.

And true enough, forging a weapon required time and effort, and the craftsman's skill could turn it brittle, which made it hard to guarantee its quality. By comparison, using casting to make a weapon meant consistent quality, and it allowed for producing in large numbers, too.

Forging yielded higher yet inconsistent quality and a smaller amount of products, while casting offered consistent quality and mass production. Putting aside the question of which one was better, given the fact weapons were disposable, it was only natural that cast weapons would be more accepted due to their price.

The old man's skill isn't half bad, though. I see why the owner recommended him. Buying here might be nice, depending on the price, that is...

Ryoma admitted the old man had skill, but that opened up a new problem.

"So, what're you lookin' for? A sword, or a spear?"

And there it was. This place sold swords, spears, even axes, but sadly there wasn't a katana in sight.

That's a problem. He hasn't crafted any katanas. This place does feel like Europe, so I didn't get my hopes up about it or anything, but still...

Ryoma still wasn't going to give up on the shopkeeper, though. He wasn't fixated on Japanese katanas, and would be able to compromise with a middle-eastern shamshir or a Chinese liuyedao.

"Do you have any curved, single-edged swords?"

"Curved, single-edged, you say..." He replied, deep in thought. "Are you looking for katanas, by any chance?"

"You have them?!" Ryoma exclaimed in surprise.

The city seemed European, and the soldiers all carried Western-style weapons like double-edged swords and halberds.

"Sorry, but my shop doesn't have any, and I don't know how to make 'em, so I can't take an order either." He shook his head apologetically. "I know about them, though. Katanas are weapons used in the central and eastern continents, specialized for slashin'. You need some specialized trainin' to use them, though, so they're not common in other continents. No point in stockin' up on a weapon no one has any use for, see?"

"Yeah, I understand..." That was a perfectly reasonable justification.

"If you were gonna find them anywhere 'round here, it'd be in the eastern port town, Pherzaad." The old man said pensively, stroking his

beard.

“The port town, Pherzaad?”

“Top place for foreign trade in the western continent, that. You can get goods from the eastern continent there, via the central continent.”

Those words left Ryoma rather troubled.

If he doesn't have a katana, do I go with a sword instead? But I've never used one before. Do I take a spear, then? No... Maybe on the road it'll be fine, but it'll be hard to carry around in town. Then an axe, maybe? That's not too bad an idea, but... Using a weapon you can only get in that part of town sounds problematic...

Using a weapon he wasn't accustomed to would be exposing himself to danger, and Ryoma didn't want to compromise on something that would be so intimately linked with his life.

But on the other hand, weapons were consumable, after all. No matter how high the quality of the weapon he used, the blade would gradually grow stained with oil and chip away. So long as he wasn't keeping them stored away like some kind of art in a collection, all weapons would require repairing and replacing.

The reality of it made Ryoma ponder his options, but the shopkeeper probably noticed Ryoma's conflict, since he decided to speak up.

“Hmm, so regular weapons ain't cuttin' it for ya, eh... Fine, then! I'll show ya me collection. If ya find anything useful there, you can take it!”

“Huh?”

“Well, y'see, I keep all the stuff I put me eye on there, and things adventurers bring in that're pretty impressive but hard to use. Weapons and tools I can't sell, since no one knows how to use 'em. Maybe you'll find something ya can use in there. I can let you have a few if you need 'em! Follow me!”

With that said, the old man beckoned Ryoma behind the counter, towards a staircase leading down to a basement. At the bottom of the staircase was a steel door, which the shopkeeper unlocked with a key he took out of his pocket.

“Come on in. Can't say if you'll find anything you want, lad.”

When they first met he called him ‘tyro,’ but at some point he'd changed his attitude.

I guess he acknowledges me on some level...

The change seemed to have happened when Ryoma said he could tell the difference between a cast weapon and a forged one. Apparently, craftsmen tended to treat customers who acknowledged their work with more affection.

“Wow, this is something...” Ryoma found himself saying with

admiration.

The room the old man ushered him into was fairly large, at around 50 square meters, and was lined with countless shelves. On top of those shelves was an assortment of weapons, waiting for the day a warrior capable of handling them appeared.

“From the right you have swords, then spears, axes and bows. Each one of them is a fine product, made at the hands of a master craftsman. The kinds of weapons that pick their wielders, eh? Someone with considerable skill. But that’s not what I wanted to show ya.”

The old man then led him to the leftmost shelf.

“I wanted to show you this.”

Ryoma turned his gaze toward the weapons on the shelf. The first thing he noticed was a wooden tonfa. There were also other unique weapons, like a three-sectioned-staff, nunchaku, a sai and emei daggers. There were even chakrams and an extendable baton.

What the hell... Where did he get all this stuff...

Ryoma’s surprise was understandable. They were completely out of place in this place and age. It was a mix of many cultures with no connecting thread.

“Whaddaya say?”

“These are too unique...” Ryoma shook his head.

“Eh, knew it... You dunno how to use them?”

“No, I can use them, but... I haven’t had any fundamental practice with them.” Ryoma said, picking up the tonfas, cutting through the air with them in a rotating movement.



“Whoa there. This ain’t good enough for ya?” The old man asked Ryoma with a fascinated expression.

“Nope, no good. I know how to use them, technically, but I can’t really apply that. I won’t get anything out of using them in real combat.” Ryoma replied, putting the tonfas back on the shelf.

“Say, lad...” The old man asked suspiciously. “Ya really a beginner? First time I’ve served a customer like ya. I thought ya were a tyro at first, but nothing you say or do is normal...”

“Come on, old man. I really am just a beginner. I just happen to know a lot from traveling all over the place with my father.” Ryoma answered with a wry smile.

“I wonder ’bout that... Well, never mind. So, whatcha gonna do?” He didn’t seem convinced, but the shopkeeper urged Ryoma to pick a weapon.

His eyes were shining with expectation. The weapons that slumbered in his storage for years might finally find a wielder. Even if these weren’t weapons he had made, it felt like he was giving his daughter away for marriage. But contrary to the old man’s expectations, Ryoma only gave half-convinced nods and advanced deeper into the room.

“Hmm...”

It’s not like I can’t use them at all, but I have to keep in mind that using something too unusual might attract attention...

Weapons each came with their own advantages, but it took training to make use of them. On the other hand, weapons with unusual shapes were imposing, but also attracted the gazes of others. Since he was being pursued, Ryoma didn’t want to draw unwanted attention to himself.

“Oh!” Having come to the end of the room, Ryoma’s gaze fell on a certain item.

It was a chain that had weights attached on both ends. It was eighty centimeters in length and quite thin, so it could easily be concealed within one’s clothes.

“Ah, that one.” The old man said, regarding the chain in Ryoma’s hands. “I hear an otherworlder brought this one in. Anything weird about this chain?”

“An otherworlder?!” Ryoma raised his voice, taken by surprise at that unexpected word.

“Yeah. Everything on this shelf is things brought or made by otherworlders.”

Ryoma kept wondering why eastern culture seemed to be mixed in so prominently, but what the old man had just said explained everything. It was because they had been summoning people of

random races and origins for so long.

I get it! So that's why their culture is so advanced in some places and less so in others!

In other words, the summoned people applied their varied knowledge, and implemented it in this world. The bank card was a good example. A modern person was likely summoned, and implemented their knowledge in bank management networks. Ryoma didn't know what they used to do that in a world without computers, but it seems they were employing something that wasn't technology.

Conversely, the reason they were still using parchments was few people actually knew how to make paper. Or maybe making it in large numbers was too costly?

Paper is so accessible that few people know how to actually make it... And there's no machinery to mass produce it.

Ergo, fields of knowledge where people summoned had had the knowledge to further them were at a standard similar to modern society, while fields of knowledge which didn't have such people were still stuck in medieval times.

"What's with you?" The shopkeeper asked, eying the deep in thought Ryoma suspiciously.

"Ah! No... Erm, I was just thinking about something..." Ryoma picked up the chain again to shake off his thoughts.

Not bad... Grandpa taught me how to use a weighted chain, and I can hide it inside my clothes. Besides that...

There wasn't a lot of value to hiding weapons in this world, where you had people openly carrying swords and spears. But that was also why having an ace hidden up his sleeve was useless.

After some deliberation, Ryoma chose to take the weighted chain, as well as the chakrams for projectile weapons. One could best describe them as CDs with blades running along their rims.

Ryoma picked the chakrams for several reasons, but the most important one was how bladed weapons had the greatest potential for injuring and killing.

"Old man, I'll take these two and a sword."

"I thought you didn't like regular swords?" The shopkeeper was visibly surprised by Ryoma's words.

"No, but I have work to attend to tomorrow."

After thinking on it for so long, Ryoma decided to pick a sword which he wasn't used to. Any weapons which were too novel would simply attract unwanted attention.

"That right? Well, if you're in a hurry, that's that. I'll pick you one you can wield with one arm. Let's go back up for now."

"Thank you." Ryoma bowed his head to the old man, who had started climbing up the stairs, in gratitude.

Ryoma squinted as sunlight streamed in from the east. The sword he bought from the blacksmith was on his back, and the chakrams were dangling from a leather sack on his waist. His appearance was truly a valiant one. But as if to deliberately contradict his appearance, Ryoma nervously sifted through the sack he was carrying, verifying the weight of its contents.

“Had a pretty close call back there...”

He was referring to something that happened yesterday, after he returned from the weapons shop. While he was having dinner and gathering information in the Sea Rumble Parlor, he suddenly realized something.

“Ah!” His voice echoed through the restaurant which, at that time of day, now served as a pub.

The gazes of all the customers turned toward his voice.

“M-Ma’am...”

“What? What’s wrong?” The owner asked, rushing to Ryoma’s side with surprise.

She was concerned there might have been a bug in his food, but judging by his expression, it wasn’t that sort of situation which had caused his outburst. As the owner asked him with a stressed voice, Ryoma responded in a hushed voice.

“Th-The letter. The letter, I...”

“Don’t tell me you lost the letter you were supposed to deliver?!” She asked, her expression changing.

If that were true, it would be a serious blunder, and he’d have to pay a penalty for sure. Or rather, the penalty wasn’t that big a problem. This kind of mistake might have been forgivable if he’d had experience of some sort under his belt, but being an utter novice and screwing up like this would make it difficult for him to find more work. The guild did know to mark people who were problematic, after all.

“N-No... I never even got the letter to start with...”

Ryoma’s answer made the owner break into a smile. It seemed many novices had made the same mistake before.

“Oh-ho... So you must have left without going to the delivery counter, then.”

“Delivery counter?”

The other customers seemed to have picked up on the situation, since they were smirking to themselves while looking at Ryoma.

“Look at the novice.”

“Yeah, I was like that on my first job, too.”

“Damn guild and their bureaucracy, am I right?”

Ryoma picked up on the whispers that erupted from here and there.

“Ahahahaha.” The owner laughed loudly, unable to hold back her amusement any longer.

That prompted everyone else to break out laughing along with her.

Ryoma didn’t quite understand why he was being laughed at. But if nothing else, it seemed this wasn’t a fatal mistake, which made him just a little more relieved. All the same, his heart was still riled by doubt and irritation.

“Aha, sorry, sorry.” Noticing Ryoma wallowing in silence while being laughed at by everyone, the owner calmed down and hid her mouth behind her apron. “I think just about every other newcomer ends up falling into that one.”

There was still a very obvious grin on her face.

“What do you mean?”

Ryoma’s words prompted the customers to burst into cheering.

“Cheers for the novice’s trial, lads!”

“All hail the bureaucracy! They’ve claimed yet another victim!”

“Don’t let it get to you and keep on tryin’, newbie!”

The situation wasn’t becoming any clearer, which made Ryoma stare at the owner quizzically again.

“Come now,” the lady said, noticing Ryoma’s gaze. “When you registered with the guild, didn’t they give you something?”

“From the guild? Just my card, and... Hey, wait a minute!”

Her words made Ryoma’s mind grind to a halt as he recalled.

That’s it! After I registered, she gave me some kind of booklet!

The clerk had handed it to him after he completed his registration. Ryoma simply threw it into his sack and forgot about it, and it was only natural he would until he was reminded of it. It was a thick booklet with over a hundred pages. No one would read it as soon as they’d received it, especially not when they’d just registered.

“Try having a look at page three in that thing.”

Prompted by the lady’s words, Ryoma fished the booklet out of the sack.

“There...” Placing the booklet on the table, Ryoma saw it was titled ‘Information for Guild Beginners.’

It was full of essential information that people who took requests from the guild would need to know.

“You accepted a request at the Guild’s reception counter, right?”

Ryoma nodded at her question.

“Well, the reception counter doesn’t do anything *but* reception. So after you take a delivery request, you need to go to the delivery counter and accept whatever it is you’re delivering.”

It seemed simple when hearing it explained like this, but Ryoma didn’t quite feel convinced. He wasn’t trying to make excuses, but he

felt it would likely be more efficient if they'd just give him the item in question once the request was accepted. Of course, he wasn't in much position to say that when he'd simply tossed the booklet into his sack and forgotten about it, but he still didn't feel like he was at fault for this.

But it seemed this happened quite often to people. The owner probably saw quite a few beginners make the same mistake; small wonder, then, that she understood what had happened just from that one whisper of his.

"You're looking pretty disgruntled there. Well, the system can be a bit complicated so the guild provides these booklets, but the majority of people don't read that far. After all, it's their first time registering and their first job to boot. They're so nervous, they just forget about the darn booklet. It's like the first trial a newcomer has to conquer."

It seemed she understood Ryoma's displeasure perfectly enough, and thoroughly explained things with a smile.

"Is the guild still open?"

The time was 8:30 in the evening. Most stores, except for pubs, were closed at this time. If the guild were closed, he'd have to squander away time tomorrow until they opened. It seemed his concerns were unfounded, though.

"Heheheh. The guild is open 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. All of that's written in the booklet, by the way, so make sure to read it."

Hearing that, Ryoma hurriedly gorged on his dinner of grilled meat. Leaving his money for the meal on the counter, he rushed over to the store's exit and bowed his head to the lady in gratitude. He was headed, of course, to the guild's delivery counter.

"Yes! Here's the item in question. Good luck with the delivery, Mr. Mikoshiba." A woman wearing glasses handed Ryoma an envelope covered with oil paper. "It's sealed with wax. Do be careful with it, though; if the seal is broken, regardless of whether you've seen what's inside, we will have to incur a fine."

Checking the information board near the guild's entrance led Ryoma to the first basement level of the building, where the delivery counter was. Ryoma presented his card, and the girl at the counter quickly brought the letter over. Things could have ended up this easy much quicker if only he had simply read the booklet earlier, though.

Well, better late than never, I suppose.

While still bitterly reluctant to admit he was wrong, Ryoma was grateful for his luck. He then went back to his inn which faced the main street to spend the night, and the next morning he set out from the capital of O'lortmea.

"Fwaaaaah..." A yawn escaped from Ryoma's mouth.

Perhaps owing to the early hour of the day, the road to Melpheren was barren except for Ryoma. After going back to the inn, Ryoma took the advice the Sea Rumble Parlor's owner had given him and read the Information for Guild Beginners booklet. He didn't quite know everything, but he did have a grasp on the basics. However, since he had read it well into the night, he'd ended up going to bed at quite a late hour.

He'd also reconfirmed the price of medicine and antidotes, only to find they were rather expensive. Judging by the explanation written on the bottle, it was rather effective at treating injuries, but financially speaking this wasn't something he could use easily.

If only this were a video game, those would be the cheapest items you could buy...

Another stark difference between this world and a video game was that if he were to die, there would be no continues. When considering that, Ryoma realized that this kind of medicine was not something to be stingy about.

Putting aside the money he would have to invest into his gear, earning a silver coin a day would guarantee him three meals a day and staying at a moderately clean and safe inn. He could cut that amount in half by compromising, but his quality of life would degrade accordingly. For Ryoma, who had lived in Japan, one of the leading developed countries on Earth, living any less conveniently was unacceptable.

But the monsters... Will they actually appear if I stray off the road a little?

The scenery around him was the very vision of serenity. But contrary to its peaceful appearance, the world outside the city walls was apparently rife with danger.

The Information for Guild Beginners booklet he'd read last night contained information about how to accept and report requests, plus information regarding the habitats of creatures novice adventurers would be asked to slay, like wild dogs and bees. According to the booklet, the further one strayed from the road, the stronger monsters became. The breeding grounds of the wild dogs and wild bees he was asked to hunt this time were in a forest just off the main road.

Well, either way, the best way to know for sure is to go and see for myself.

Expectation and anxiety filled his body. It was his first battle against monsters. If he couldn't handle this, he wouldn't be able to survive in this world as a mercenary or an adventurer. Ryoma got off the road and entered the forest in search of his first prey...

Despite being close to the highway, the forest was rather thick. After advancing for a short while, parting his way through the

branches, a buzzing sound, generated by flapping wings, reached his ears. Fixing his gaze in the direction of the sound, he found five insects buzzing around a tree some ten meters away. Though, he wasn't sure if describing them as 'insects' was apt, given they were as large as a medium-sized dog...

Are those the bees? The booklet described their size, but they look bigger than I expected in person.

In terms of shape, they looked like normal bees, but were larger than any insect Ryoma had ever seen. Those were, in all likelihood, the monsters called wild bees. According to the booklet, their large bodies meant they weren't very quick. But they did carry lethal poison, and being stung several times could result in death.

I suppose I should take the initiative for now.

Realizing the enemy hadn't seen him yet, Ryoma carefully took out chakrams from his sack and lowered his waist, as if drawing a sword from its sheath. With his right leg propped forward, he bent his waist to the left. Stretching his body like a bow, he then unleashed all the force he built up with a sharp breath. The chakram was fired off, cutting through the air as it flew straight toward one of the bees.

Two sounds echoed immediately after. But not minding that, Ryoma fired off another chakram in quick succession. Ryoma repeated this process until the buzzing completely died out.

Shifting his gaze toward his targets, the bees were already lying dead on the ground. Some were split in half by their torso, others had their heads lopped off, some had their wings punctured and were unable to stay aloft. They were all hit in different spots, but the chakrams seemed to have all cut through the bees' bodies.

Taking out his sword, Ryoma approached the bees. They all seemed to be dying. Starting with the one that was still the healthiest despite its torn wings, Ryoma delivered the finishing blows to them.

And next is... Hmm.

Confirming there were no enemies around, Ryoma took out the booklet.

So I can sell their wings and stingers...

Using the information in the booklet as a reference, Ryoma began tearing off parts of the bees' bodies. After all, the important part of an adventurer's job came after slaying monsters.

Ryoma pulled out a poisoned stinger, covered in green bodily fluids.

Whoa... This thing's five centimeters long...

Even without any venom, this thing was sharp enough to cause a fatal injury if you were to stab someone with it. He then went on to cut off their wings, only to realize three of the bees had their wings punctured.

Aww, crap. If I remember correctly...

Flipping through the booklet hurriedly, Ryoma found, as he'd remembered, a warning.

'Since all body parts will be used for sale, please be advised that any overly damaged parts cannot be accepted.'

That was fairly obvious. If they were being put up for sale, no one would buy damaged ingredients. That said, this wasn't something you could be particular over when fighting with one's life on the balance. Dying over being too greedy was no joke.

In a game, you'd just pick up any items that get dropped...

Giving up on the more badly damaged ones, Ryoma focused on the ones whose wings had been mostly left unscathed.

You gotta be clever about it, so you don't damage things after you've gone to the trouble of killing them... But that said, it's not worth losing your life over. I guess I'll just have to give up on money when things get really dangerous...

This was a fairly obvious truth, and one that didn't comply with video game logic. The harshness of it all made Ryoma heave a despondent sigh.

Having concluded his dissection of the bees, Ryoma advanced deeper into the forest. He'd prepared his lunch back at the inn, which left him with ample time to explore.

I need to get used to this sword.

Ryoma couldn't help but long for the katana he was used to wielding... Ryoma was somehow able to make use of the chakrams thanks to the skills he'd learned for throwing shurikens, but his sword was a weapon he simply wasn't accustomed to.

Unlike a katana, which was used by drawing and cutting, a sword was used by applying force. They were fundamentally different weapons. And having been trained to use a katana since a young age, a sword felt terribly awkward to use for Ryoma. He had no choice but to cross the border with his current equipment, though.

His pursuers from the empire had already gone ahead of him, and were undoubtedly searching for him. At least it felt natural to assume so, given they had the mobility of being on horseback. The question was whether they had sent agents to the eastern border, where Ryoma was intending to escape from, but he was somehow confident.

If I were them and had to track down someone whose face I didn't know, I wouldn't be fussy when it came to how many people I sent to hunt them down. First I'd strengthen security around the borders, and not let any suspicious people pass through. And then I'd tighten my grip on the routes leading from the capital to the borders.

Ryoma continued thinking as he advanced through the forest.

But since they failed to capture me while I was in the capital, I've

pretty much already won. The fact they don't know what I look like already puts me at a huge advantage. Now I just need to get to the border somehow...

As Ryoma pondered things, the path before him suddenly opened up. The forest's trees were cleared, leaving an open space in the middle of the forest. The growling of animals suddenly reached Ryoma's ears.

Ryoma looked ahead, catching sight of large dogs, roughly one meter in height. There were thirteen of them; likely a family. Some of them were visibly pups.

So those are wild dogs...

They were still only growling, trying to scare the intruder away. They weren't trying to pounce on him, likely hesitating out of the urge to keep their young safe.

This is my chance.

Ryoma pulled out his chakrams swiftly, taking aim at the older dogs which stepped forward to protect the pups. Ryoma unleashed the chakrams, which cut through the air toward the dogs. They were fired at a calculated angle; if the parent dogs tried to dodge, the pups would get hit, and if they didn't, they themselves would be targets.

It was a cruel ploy that used their desire to protect their offspring against them, but Ryoma unleashed his chakrams with no mercy. The sound of flesh being torn filled the forest, and a yelp of pain reverberated against the trees.

Ryoma then rapidly drew his sword and rushed toward the wild dogs, who had already recognized Ryoma as an enemy. Enraged by his harming their family, the dogs mercilessly bared their fangs at Ryoma.

There were eight of them. The five that had been damaged by the chakrams retreated. The dog that took off first jumped up two meters ahead of Ryoma.

Guess that's what you can expect out of a dumb animal...

Ryoma drove his sword between the dog's opened jaws. Jumping wasn't a wise decision in the slightest, since without wings it was incapable of moving in the air. The circumstances mattered, of course; a surprise attack was another story, but doing it during a frontal assault like this was nothing short of foolishness.

Of course, the wild dogs didn't have the intellect to understand that. They attacked Ryoma as their instincts dictated. Ryoma simply slipped by their sides, cutting their heads off one after another as he did. Each swing was a kill, as he flowed from one to motion to another.

But as he dispatched the dogs with almost mechanical procedure, Ryoma must have grown complacent. One of the dogs didn't leap at him, simply rushing toward his right leg with its mouth open. Ryoma

reflexively kicked up his leg, driving it into the dog's throat. As the dog crouched in pain, Ryoma drove his sword into its head.

Phew. That was close. I almost let my guard down...

Three dogs remained, the pups nestling up to their parents' corpses. Ryoma stepped up to them, who jolted up, sensing the danger.

As one might expect of creatures called monsters, even the pups seemed ferocious. Even with their parents dead, they didn't back off, growling menacingly. There were roughly five meters between them. Ryoma propped his sword up on the left of his body, in a stance preparing to slash from the lower left to the upper right.

As they glared into each other's eyes, the air gradually became heavier. It was Ryoma versus three wild dogs. At the moment where both of their killing instincts were at the breaking point, Ryoma suddenly wiped his resolve away.

The dogs, which were about to pounce at any moment, lost their aggressiveness in confusion, hesitating at Ryoma's odd behavior. It was then that Ryoma suddenly closed the distance, making a diagonal slash from the bottom left.

The first dog's head was cut clean off. Ryoma then swung a second time with his sword swung aloft, tracing the same trajectory again to split a second dog's abdomen in two. All that transpired within mere seconds.

The third dog broke off into a sprint, running the other way. Its instincts urged it to prioritize flight over fight, it seemed. But Ryoma wasn't going to stand idly by and let it get away. Lodging his sword into the ground, Ryoma fired off a chakram at its defenseless back.

Phew, that makes thirteen...

The battle only lasted three to four minutes. Since each of them was slain with a single blow, it was hardly a lengthy one.

The chakrams are lethal enough, but... They're not all that easy to retrieve, so that's a bit of a turn off...

Since they had no handle, and their rims were entirely made up of blades, the chakrams' lethal effectiveness was certainly strong, but it also meant they tended to get buried in the opponent's flesh. Wiping the six thrown chakrams clean of blood with a cloth, he put them back into the sack on his waist.

Let's see... What parts of wild dogs are...

According to the booklet, the most valuable parts of a wild dog's body were the two fangs growing from its upper jaw and its fur. Ryoma proceeded to skin the dogs of their furs using his sword, albeit awkwardly, since he wasn't used to it.

Chapter 3: Resolve

“Good work last night, everyone!” Rolfe’s voice echoed through the plaza in front of the gate. “I’ve come to relay our new plan of action, decided just now. Lady Shardina, Lady Celia, Sir Orlando and I will serve as captains and lead companies of thirty to forty soldiers each. We’ll then head to the south and east, and commence our search! Our formation will be as discussed earlier. As you all know, the culprit is the otherworlder that slew Sir Gaius. Exercise the utmost of caution. Now, each of you be swift, for we’ll be setting out!”

As he watched the soldiers take their positions, Rolfe thought back to what had happened last night. The empire’s pursuers unknowingly passed Ryoma by at the gates. Celia, Rolfe, Orlando and Shardina had continued their pursuit since noon and deep into the night. But the trail of the soldier who had left the city gates quickly went cold, and no information as to his whereabouts cropped up.

“How does this make any kind of sense?!” Celia’s angered bellow echoed through the capital’s gate. “We have this many soldiers mobilized, and we still cannot locate one man?! None of you are slacking off, I hope!”

She looked around with a face befitting a demon. Her well-shaped eyebrows were furrowed upwards, and her eyes were dyed red. Her troops, which scattered in all directions in their search, returned empty-handed to their gathering point near the gate. As the price for not having located a single clue, they could only stand there and soak in her verbal abuse.

All they had for now was an eyewitness report of a man dressed in a soldier’s armor passing through the gate at around two in the afternoon. That was a mere twenty minutes before they organized their forces and passed by the gate themselves. After searching for more than ten hours, deep into the night, their search came up with nothing.

It was only natural for Celia to raise her voice in answer, especially considering Gaius had been her only remaining blood relative. It was hardly unreasonable to expect her to become emotional over this, but this was a problematic situation for a commander to be in.

“Calm yourself, Celia. The soldiers have all worked to the best of their abilities.” A voice as pure as the chiming of a bell gently

chastised Celia from behind her back.

“Lady Shardina... My apologies.” Turning around to face the speaker, Celia’s voice lowered in tone.

She couldn’t find it in herself to argue against the empire’s first princess.

“I believe we should probably stop here for today... Everyone looks quite tired.” Shardina looked around.

No soldiers made a blatant show of being tired, but they were all still visibly fatigued.

“But... If we stop now...” Celia intended to argue back, but Shardina shook her head.

She’d realized that if Celia were to force them to continue the search any further the way she was now, she would achieve nothing.

“It’s dangerous at night, even in the vicinity of the capital. We should revise our search and start again tomorrow.”

Rolfe, who had come over to see what the fuss was all about, backed up her words. He was likely thinking the same thing.

“Yes, it’s just as Lady Shardina says. Overexerting yourself in this search would yield nothing. We would do well to step back for now and restart our efforts. What say you, Lady Celia?”

Celia couldn’t find the words to argue back against Rolfe’s idea, but her emotions, which spurred her to chase down the killer of her family, wouldn’t let her accept the facts.

“Sir Orlando,” Shardina said, hugging the silent Celia’s shoulders. “Take Celia back to her mansion. I’m sure this day has been hard for her, with Sir Gaius’s passing.”

“No. I can go back on my own.” Celia rejected Shardina’s concerns.

It was obvious to all that she was at her limit, though.

“You shouldn’t force yourself, Celia. Sir Orlando, please see to her.”

“Yes, ma’am! Now, Lady Celia, come this way.”

Reacting swiftly to Shardina’s words, Orlando tried to wrap his arms around Celia.

“Let go of me, Orlando! I can go home on my own.”

But in her attempts to shake off Orlando’s hands, Celia lost balance and tumbled to the ground. It was only natural, since she’d been on the march for over ten hours, searching for the culprit without a break.

In the end, Orlando carried her over to a carriage they’d prepared for her, and Celia went back home to her estate.

“Haah... With all said and done, Lady Shardina, what are we to do after this?” Rolfe sighed, watching the carriage roll away.

“I don’t think there’s much to do. There is no point in searching

any longer..." Shardina shrugged casually at Rolfe's question.

"No point, you say..." He'd already presumed as much, but hearing it straight from Shardina's lips still made Rolfe's face contort slightly.

"It was decided the moment that soldier left the gates."

"But still... We organized all our forces for this..."

Rolfe honestly believed he had done his best, and doubted that anyone could take command under such conditions better than him. That was the sort of pride which a war hero would naturally possess.

"I am aware. Sir Rolfe, I have no qualms regarding your command here. You've done all within your purview." Shardina's gaze shifted toward the forest. "Our chances of arresting him within the borders of the empire were already quite slim. After all, we don't know what he looks like or what his age is. Still, if he were walking around dressed as a soldier, we might have had a chance of catching him."

"So what you're saying is, he's no longer dressed as one of the royal guards?"

"It is most likely..." Shardina nodded.

If I were in his place, I'd change out of those clothes as soon as I had the chance... Anyone being actively pursued would no doubt do the same...

"Then... What are we to do next?"

"We've already given orders to blockade the barrier stations. All that remains is to head for the borders and continue our search as we go."

As Shardina spoke, Rolfe regarded her with an anxious expression. Were they really supposed to continue searching for him without any way to tell him apart?

"Do you think we'll be able to find him that way?"

"At any rate, we can narrow the options down to two possible destinations."

Rolfe's face was washed over with surprise. He picked up on the confidence in her tone.

"Two destinations? So you believe he will head south or east?"

Rolfe faintly imagined the distance between the capital and the empire's borders. Since she had said two destinations, he naturally considered the most adjacent border, the southern one, and the eastern border, which was the second closest.

"Correct. But he'd most likely go east..."

"May I ask what makes you think so?"

"Honestly speaking, it's mostly intuition." Shardina said with a smile. "But I doubt I'm wrong."

Turning to face Rolfe, she continued.

"He's the kind of man capable of escaping the castle and shaking off our pursuit until now. He wouldn't run about mindlessly."

“So you’re saying the otherworlder is aware of the empire’s geography...? But that’s...” Rolfe’s expression clouded over.

If Shardina’s assumptions were correct, the task of catching this man was far harder than they’d anticipated.

“It seems most likely...”

“But wouldn’t he choose to go take the shortest route and go south? I would not pick the eastern border, were I in his shoes.”

If nothing else, Rolfe would prefer the shortest route if he were on the run and in a situation where every moment he spent within the empire’s borders was a moment his life was at risk. In his opinion, there would be no point in deliberately picking the longer way out.

“Right. If your intent was just to run, you would head south. But consider that this is what we would predict he would do.”

“So you say he chose the eastern border over the southern one, assuming we would predict he would choose the latter? Impossible... No matter how you look at it, it’s too...”

“Sir Rolfe.” Shardina shook her head at his words. “I, too, hope my suspicions are unfounded. But he’s outsmarted us every step of the way so far. If we underestimate him, he may slip through the border without us even noticing it.”

“True enough...” Rolfe said, pondering. “However, we can’t discard the chance he might go south...”

Rolfe’s sense of judgment was always pragmatic. That was both his finest feature and his greatest fault. For better or worse, he couldn’t shake off what he perceived as common sense.

“I perfectly understand what you mean. Heading for the east is simply my intuition... Which is why I believe I will leave the southern border to you, Celia and Sir Orlando, and I will head for the eastern one.”

“I don’t think that’s too bad of an idea... But wouldn’t it be wiser to split into two pairs instead?”

Rolfe’s suggestion was a reasonable one. In most such cases, they would split their forces in half. Shardina shook her head, however.

“No. Going east is simply my idea. Which is why, Sir Rolfe, you should stay behind and support Celia... After all, you have nothing to worry about. I have a reliable vice-commander at my side.”

Rolfe recalled the sight of how Celia, usually calm enough to be known as the Queen of Blizzards, was overcome with frenzy.

Yes... Just as Her Highness says, it would be dangerous to leave Sir Orlando alone to restrain Lady Celia’s rage... Rolfe took a moment to calculate things. Well, with that man at her side, I doubt Her Highness will come to harm.

The image of the reliable vice-commander Shardina spoke of vividly surfaced in his mind.

“Very well. I will organize our formations according to your decision, then.”

“Please do, Sir Rolfe.”

Rolfe then went on to force his tired body awake, working into the night to organize their formation. All this to apprehend a single otherworlder.

“Sir Rolfe! We’ve finished moving the troops! We’ll be departing shortly!” The voice of a runner dragged Rolfe out of his reminiscence of what had happened last night.

“Shall we go, Lady Shardina?”

Shardina responded by waving her sword ahead, beyond the gates.

“March onward!” Rolfe’s shout prompted two hundred soldiers on horseback to set out, in pursuit of the elusive otherworlder.

The column of horsemen rushed along the highway leading east. The vice-commander, Saitou, approached Shardina, who rode at the top of the line.

“Your Highness. Just as you’ve ordered, we’ve prioritized setting up a blockade at Adelpho.”

“I see. Good work. Very quick too, Saitou.”

She’d only given the order last night, so his execution was quick, even if he was on horseback. Her expression showed she was pleased at Saitou’s report.

“Do you think we’ll be able to arrest him in Adelpho?”

This man, Saitou, seemed to be in his late twenties. He had a thin, tempered body, and his hair was carefully combed down. He gave the impression of a dignified salaryman. If you were to put him in a business suit and send him out to the business district, he would likely naturally blend in with the crowd. The eyes hidden behind his silver-rimmed glasses glimmered with intelligence.

“Oh?” Shardina regarded the calm man’s question with a whimsical smile. “Did I ever say anything to that effect?”

“No. That is precisely why I’m asking, Your Majesty the Princess.”

Perhaps his answer didn’t fit with her expectations, because Shardina became a bit moody as she answered him.

“Then let me ask you, my dear, reliable Saitou. Will we be able to arrest the otherworlder in Adelpho?”

“No. It would most likely be impossible.” Saitou answered plainly. Shardina seemed to like that answer.

“Oh? How so?” She asked, smiling faintly.

“How are we to seek out a man when we don’t know what he looks like? Or do you happen to have some sort of information regarding him?”

That had been the most problematic element of all their attempts thus far. All they knew was that the otherworlder was a tall, well-built male, and that he was intelligent and unforgiving in nature. You could find plenty of people like that in the empire.

They had sought him out yesterday based on the assumption he was wearing a soldier's armor, but once they left the gate, they lost all traces of him. As such, assuming that he changed out of his armor, as Shardina did, was reasonable. But that also meant they had no more clues to track him with.

"That's right... Heheh. No point in trying to seek out someone when we don't know what he looks like."

"What should we do, then?" Saitou regarded Shardina's smile with a dubious expression.

Honestly speaking, the situation seemed rather hopeless. That question, however, simply made a prankster's smile spread over Shardina's features.

"Well, we don't know his face, so we'll just have to have him tell us, won't we? That he's the culprit."

The moment Saitou heard Shardina say that, a sharp glint filled his eyes. It seemed he realized what his mistress was thinking.

"I see. So that's why you blockaded Adelpho's checkpoint..."

"Yes... Though, given our limited manpower, we probably shouldn't expect too much..."

"Can't we mobilize the forces garrisoned in Adelpho?"

"Not possible." Shardina shook her head. "Moving the garrison would create an opening in the border, and that would increase the chances of Xarooda attacking. We can't ask the nobles for support, either."

Their eastern neighbor, the kingdom of Xarooda, wasn't a match for the empire in terms of national power. The western continent was divided into five regions, and among them, O'ltormea was a great power that controlled the central territory, and part of the south as well. By comparison, Xarooda only had a small territory, making up a third of the western tip of the eastern side of the continent.

To top it off, most of Xarooda's territory was made up of mountain districts, and the terrain afforded limited space for farmland or to support its population. It was inferior to O'ltormea on all fronts—military strength, economy, and manpower.

As such, it was hard to believe Xarooda would send its soldiers across the border, and even if they did, O'ltormea would easily be able to respond to their invasion.

But that was only assuming O'ltormea would be able to exhibit one hundred percent of its power to push them back. It was originally a small country in the center of the continent, and, by taking

advantage of the turbulent times, grew into a greater country by taking over its neighboring countries. But that came with a cost, as O'ltormea was currently in a state of open hostilities, or cold war at best, with all of its neighbors.

In addition, the nobles living in the territories near the empire's borders were all survivors of defeated countries, and while they swore fealty to the empire on the surface, they only did so to retain their family's name and honor. Shardina wasn't foolish enough to presume their loyalty was genuine.

In other words, the empire of O'ltormea was caught between two foes. One was their external enemies, their neighbors who frowned upon their imperialistic conquest, and their interior enemies, the potentially treacherous nobles.

"Yes, true enough... Should the nobles hear of this, they could take advantage of things to start a rebellion."

Hearing Saitou say this made Shardina smile bitterly, imagining what should happen if the nobles and their neighboring countries learned of this incident.

"We may have to announce it at some point, but now isn't the time. So we have to be cautious with the means we pick for this... Even if they put us at a disadvantage."

Saitou nodded silently at Shardina's words.

When Ryoma reached Melpheren, it was blanketed by night. Having concluded his hunting in the forest, he'd finally reached his initial destination.

It was past seven in the evening. Usually, it would take roughly three hours to get from the capital to Melpheren by foot. It was some ten odd kilometers in distance from the capital, and even considering the fact that he had stopped to hunt, he still arrived rather late.

The city gate was rather large. It was already closed because of the late hour, but after paying a toll and presenting his guild identification, Ryoma was allowed to pass.

"Phew, I finally made it."

Not having any acquaintances was tough, and Ryoma inadvertently started talking to himself. Though he had been here for just one day, being thrown into a world entirely detached from the one he grew up in was taking its toll, even on Ryoma.

Well, I shouldn't rush. I'll take any chance to take things easy.

Melpheren was roughly 100 kilometers away from the border; it would take some four hours to cover that distance on horseback. But going on foot at an average speed of 3-4 kilometers per hour, it would take three days of walking ten hours. However, Ryoma estimated, for several reasons, that it would take him more than a week.

For now, I should report to the guild.

Ryoma's bag was digging into his side, stuffed full of all the materials he'd gathered from hunting. Withstanding his stomach's grumbling, he shouldered the sack and made his way toward the guild.

"These, please." Ryoma arrived in the delivery counter at the guild's basement level, handing the letter to the clerk sitting there.

"Understood, please allow me to confirm everything is in order... Yes, it looks fine. The seal is intact."

The clerk girl took the letter and Ryoma's card, then after confirming the wax seal had not been broken, input the information into Ryoma's card.

"Yes, everything seems to be in order. I will add to your points, then. What will you do about the hunting requests? Would you like me to calculate them now?"

"Yes, please do." Ryoma nodded.

"Very well. So, that's 54 wild dogs, 31 wild bees, and 59 wild rabbits... Good work. That's quite the haul."

"Yes. The weapons I bought just yesterday have been dulled from the blood, though... Really ought to get them sharpened."

Hearing Ryoma's grumbling as he took back his card made the clerk girl's face fill with surprise.

Did he really kill this many with a sword? In a single day? I thought he was a thaumaturgist who used some large scale destruction spell... Is he really just a F rank adventurer...?

All of the reception dates for these missions were indeed described as yesterday.

"Is there a blacksmith who can handle sharpening weapons in town?" Ryoma continued, feeling her stare of surprise and awe on him.

"Erm... Leave the guild and take a left at the main street. It should be straight ahead."

"All right, I'll check it out later. By the way, are you done calculating?"

"Ah!" Ryoma's probing spurred the girl to remember what she was doing. "My apologies. The grand total is four silvers and 23 coppers. You get one point per kill, so it sums up to 144 points. Congratulations, Mr. Mikoshiba. You've elevated yourself to Double F rank."

He only registered yesterday, and he's already moved up to the next rank...?

Ryoma honestly didn't look all that happy. Though that was perhaps to be expected, since it didn't seem like achieving this was too much trouble for him.

"You don't look very pleased about your promotion." The clerk

girl put her thoughts into words.

“Well, I am, it’s just that it wasn’t much of an effort, to be honest...” Ryoma answered her directly.

“Really? Well, one of two things usually happens in this situation. If someone had some training before registering, they usually reach level E within a week or so.”

“Really?”

“Yes. On the other hand, complete amateurs can find that simply elevating themselves to Double F rank is a great endeavor.”

“Hmm. Is that so...”

Ryoma hadn’t yet figured it out, but what hindered beginners the most was working in a group. Monsters in the forest often operated in packs, which meant adventurers had to contend with several enemies at once while on the hunt.

But even weak monsters could pose a threat in large numbers. It was for this reason the guild recommended people join up and form parties, but naturally, not everyone was necessarily accepted. There were all sorts of reasons, such as the gap between individuals’ combat abilities being too wide, different ways of thinking, or conflicting interests. But whatever the case, few people took on requests alone.

That also meant that people who struggled to enter groups were beginners, especially those who hadn’t been trained in some way.

“We at the guild encourage veterans to join up with beginners and help them grow through real combat, but that can be difficult to arrange.”

Amateurs had a way of doing unpredictable things. Of course, being unpredictable didn’t necessarily mean they couldn’t produce favorable results, but in most cases these sorts of things tended to end tragically. That was why veterans tended to hesitate about helping to raise beginners.

Ergo, most beginners in the guild had to resort to completing missions by themselves until they became skilled enough, excepting those who were fortunate enough to team up with fellow novices.

But, once again, monsters operated in packs, and therein lay the issue. Even monsters a novice could dispatch one-on-one were a whole different story if encountered as a group in the unfamiliar environment of the forest. They would have to fight while being wary of every possible direction, and that was hard for the beginners. Going too hard could result in loss of life.

For this reason, most novices sought out strays - individual monsters who had become separated from their packs. Encountering them was extremely uncommon, though. One could spend the whole day in the forest and encounter only a scant few.

The result was the two cases the clerk had described. Those who

lacked the skill and only fought one-on-one, scouring the forests for strays, and those like Ryoma who were capable of fighting many opponents at once, who ended up rapidly climbing the ranks.

It was also possible to raise one's rank with only delivery requests, but it wasn't recommended. If one were to up their rank without gaining experience through true combat, all that would await them would be a gruesome death later down the line.

"Incidentally, Mr. Mikoshiba, since you've hunted this many, I'd assume you have quite a few fangs and furs, correct?"

"Yeah. Picking them apart was a pain. I was going to take them to the curio store next."

"Then maybe you would like to do some provision requests?"

"Provision requests...?" Ryoma tilted his head at the unfamiliar term.

"Yes. It would yield less money than selling them in stores, but they would help you elevate your rank faster, so it should pay off more in the long run."

"Oh, really?" Ryoma said, seemingly interested.

He was the kind of person who was fundamentally attentive when it came to maximizing his gains.

"Yes. You're aware you can only take requests that are the same rank as you or lower, yes?"

He recalled that being mentioned when registering with the guild.

"Yes, what about it?"

"Actually, when you submit a mission that's a lower rank than yours, your point gain becomes zero, but your payment doubles. It only applies for hunting requests, though."

That was rather alarming for Ryoma to hear. The booklet didn't mention that.

"What?!"

"That way, when skilled adventurers take on hunting multiple requests of a lower rank, they earn much more."

"I see!"

Ranking up is pretty nice, then. May as well take the chance and raise it.

In this situation, there was no such thing as having too much money, and even if he were financially stable for now, there was no telling when that could change. While he did want to avoid drawing attention to himself, there seemed to be quite a bit of value in increasing his rank, and he preferred to take the time to raise it now, when he had the leisure to do so.

"I understand. The reception counter is on the first floor, right?"

"Yes, just past the stairway."

Bowing his head, Ryoma swiftly ascended up the stairs.

“Hello. You’re here for provision requests, correct?”

“Yes. I’d like to take all the requests for items obtainable from wild dogs, bees and rabbits.”

The boy sitting at the counter explained the details of each request one after another in an experienced fashion.

“With regards to each item, it will be two coppers per wild dog’s fang and five per fur, two coppers per wild bee stinger and five per wing, and one copper per wild rabbit’s ear and five coppers per fur. You will gain one point per item delivered. There’s no fixed date for completion of these requests. Handing them over at the delivery counter will complete the task.”

“I’ll take them, then.”

“Very well. Best of luck to you.”

After this fairly simple exchange, Ryoma headed back down to the delivery counter.

“Did you take the requests?” The same clerk girl greeted Ryoma with a smile.

“Yes, I accepted all of them.”

“Huh? All of them?” The clerk’s expression clouded over at his response.

“Huh? Should I not have done that?”

“Oh, no, nothing of the sort. But I did want to mention that if you deliver all the items you have, you’ll have more than enough points to go up to rank E.”

That made Ryoma understand what bothered her. If he were to rank up to E, his rank F requests would stop yielding him points. And if he gained no points out of it, there was little point in delivering them to the guild. Selling them in town would make more sense financially.

Well, whatever... I’m famished and it’s getting late... I still need to get my sword sharpened, grab something to eat and find an inn. It’ll be past ten o’clock after that... I’ll just think of this as a learning experience.

Consulting the clock on the guild’s wall, it was already past eight in the evening. Right around the ideal time to have dinner and find an inn to stay in.

“I can manage them for now. I’ll hand all of them over.”

He could have turned down the requests, but that would result in lost points, which would make the calculation that much more annoying. He probably could adjust how many he delivered in order not to waste any points or money gained, but he wasn’t up to the task on his empty stomach and fatigued mind.

“Understood. I’ll be taking the materials, then.”

Ryoma spread out the contents of his rucksack onto the counter.

“Are you shitting me?!” A shout echoed through the first floor’s reception counter.

Ryoma had just reported his provision requests and raised his rank to E. Going up to the first floor with the intent of leaving and looking for a place to eat, Ryoma happened on the sight of that man.

“I risked my damn life completing this request! And now you say you can’t pay me for it?!”

The large man’s hair was bundled up under his shoulders and he was clad in iron armor. This unfamiliar man was arguing with the clerk Ryoma had accepted the requests from earlier.

“I’ve already told you! You eliminated the wrong targets, so we can’t pay for your work. It’s well past the due date for this request as well, so please pay your penalty!”

This seemingly quiet, delicate young man was talking down the brute in front of him resolutely.

“Do I look like some kind of sucker to you?! I looked up and down to find them!”

“But didn’t I tell you, Mr. Golaes?! You have to make doubly sure you understand the details of the request!”

“The hell!” The middle aged man burst out. “Aren’t you the observer here?!”

“Mr. Golaes.” The young man shook his head. “You’ve gained quite the reputation as a mercenary, but your skill as an adventurer is lacking. The request you undertook involved subjugating the Crimson Moon Brigade. But your search found nothing while you were slacking off with your investigations, and you slew some random bandits you happened across.”

The younger man was staring the older one down.

“Just as the Guild advised you, your investigation should have been more thorough. It’s undeniable that the bandits you slew were the wrong ones. We’ve recently received a report that a nearby village was recently raided by the Crimson Moon Brigade and several young women were abducted.”

The young man’s sharp glare stabbed at Golaes.

“I won’t say the damages are entirely your fault, Mr. Golaes, but had you done your task properly, that could have been prevented!” He reasoned, his eyes unwavering. “With that in mind, do you still have any complaints regarding the Guild’s treatment here?”

The very image of a stabbing remark.

The young clerk’s sharp tone made the raging man gradually drop his shoulders. It seemed he wasn’t as dumb as he looked. If nothing else, he was smart enough to realize it was his fault.

“Ugh... I’m sorry... I understand. I’ll pay the penalty.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Golaes.” The clerk’s expression softened. “I spoke

harshly. Accept my apologies.”

He bowed his head at Golaes.

“Nah, it’s my bad. I’m sorry... I took that task because it was a low-rank one, but I guess you can’t send a merc to do an adventurer’s job... Go ahead and charge the penalty to my account.”

With those parting words, Golaes walked out of the guild, his shoulders drooping.

Man, I was naive...

Ryoma had only stumbled onto this scene by accident, but it had shocked him down to his core.

What was I thinking? That these requests aren’t real, like they’re just part of a game or something? I was considering dropping some of them back there, after all.

Requests weren’t something one could accept or decline easily. In this world, they were matters of life and death. Ryoma realized just how naive he had been.

“Is something wrong, Mr. Mikoshiba?” The young clerk noticed Ryoma staring at him and came closer.

“Ah, no. I’m done with my provision requests, so I thought I’d go back to the inn for today and come back tomorrow for more work.” Ryoma said, slightly overwhelmed by how gentle the young man’s tone was now, compared to how strict it had been moments earlier.

“I see. So that’s how you ran into that little scene. Did we startle you?”

“Yeah... That’s right.”

For a moment there, this boy’s delicate features somehow seemed more menacing than Golaes’s massive frame. The boy’s conviction and vigor probably made it seem that way.

“You’d be surprised how often we get people like that.” The clerk’s expression clouded over.

“The kind that don’t complete their requests?”

“Yes.” The boy answered Ryoma’s question with a nod and a frown. “Those who can’t distinguish their own characteristics and experience end up like Mr. Golaes. He’s a very skilled mercenary, so there are no complaints regarding his combat skills. In fact, he may have attacked the wrong bandits, but he did beat them one against ten. However, his awareness regarding matters like investigation and exploration are simply too lacking. And for this, he could have chosen to team up with other adventurers.”

“I see. So if you can’t do something, you can team up with those who can.”

Ryoma’s answer made the young man’s expression soften. He looked like a teacher who had just heard his student give the answer they wanted to hear.

“Heheheh. You’re honest and smart. Keep on working hard.”

“I will. Thank you very much.”

The boy smiled and made to leave, but suddenly paused, as if remembering something.

“Oh! Yes. About the Crimson Moon Brigade we mentioned in the conversation there. They’ve recently been attacking people on the road between Melfheren and Alue, and the villages along that road. You should be careful if you’re heading in that direction.”

Bandits on the road to Alue... Ryoma thought, staring at the clerk’s back as he left.

The road to Alue. That was one of the towns along the road to the eastern border, and Ryoma’s next destination.

“This is no good, sonny! It’d be cheaper to just buy a new one.”

Ryoma went to the blacksmith he’d heard of at the guild to have his weapon sharpened, but the old man there simply said that after examining the sword.

“Is it completely useless?”

“Yeah.” The shopkeeper scoffed. “How the hell were you using it to make it this blunt? The blade’s completely rounded. It’s pretty much a glorified stick.”

Well, shit... Never thought I’d wear it out in just one day...

Ryoma was certainly more used to using blades than the average person, but he didn’t have any experience with using one to cut through flesh so many times in one day.

“Uh, well... I used it for hunting...”

“It’s completely stained with blood and rounded out. How many days have you gone without getting it serviced to get it this bad, anyway?”

“All day today. I only just bought it yesterday, and it was new...”

As Ryoma spoke, disbelief played over the blacksmith’s face.

“Don’tcha be pulling my leg, look at the state it’s in! It ain’t gonna end up like this if you kill just ten or twenty critters. You’d need to kill a hundred or so...”

But the old man realized as he looked at Ryoma’s face.

“You... ain’t joking, are ya?”

“No.” Ryoma shook his head.

“Aaah. Well, hate to break it to you, but I don’t have a sword better than this one on sale.” The blacksmith sighed, sending a glance at Ryoma’s expression. “I use casting to forge, see. Are you still fine with that?”

He’d seen the difference in quality between the swords he made and Ryoma’s own sword. But Ryoma knew this much from the moment he first set foot in the store.

“Yeah, a cast sword is fine. Preferably a convenient one... That said, could you sharpen these as well?” Ryoma said, presenting his bloodied chakrams.

“What in tarnation? These things are weapons?”

He’d probably never seen chakrams before. He picked them up curiously.

“You can see blades along the rims there.”

“Well, these don’t look as bad as the sword...” He said, holding them up against the light to inspect their condition. “When do you want them ready?”

“By tomorrow morning, if you could.”

“Well, assuming it’d take me an hour to do each one, I’ll probably be done before noon. I’ll take the job if you’re all right with that.”

Before noon, huh? I guess I’ll just spend some time at the inn and stop by the guild on the way here...

“All right. What’s your cost?” Ryoma said, reaching into the bag on his waist which served as a wallet.

“Let’s see... If you’re gonna be buying a sword too, it’d be about four silvers in total.”

That amount wasn’t a problem for Ryoma, given he’d earned a lot more than four silver coins when adding in all the materials he exchanged.

It’s a cast-forged sword, so it’s cheaper than the sword I bought at the capital... I figured I’d need to buy replacement weapons soon enough, but it could have been a problem if they were all that expensive...

The quality of one’s equipment could be a matter of life and death, so it was only natural to pursue reliable equipment. But if that high quality resulted in it being hard to replace, that could cause trouble.

“All right. I’ll be back tomorrow, around ten in the morning.” Ryoma said, and left after paying.

Right, now to get some grub...

Rubbing his empty stomach, Ryoma disappeared into the streets of Melpheren.

The third day since Ryoma was summoned to this other world dawned. It was nearly noon, and Ryoma was traveling alone down the road to Alue.

That morning, Ryoma had had a late breakfast before visiting the blacksmith to pick up his sharpened weapons.

Bandits, huh. Hope I don’t run into any of them...

The memory of what he’d seen when he stopped by the guild to accept requests flashed in his mind.

“Hurry, hurry, hurry! All those who are confident in their skill, do

take this request!”

The boy manning the reception desk yesterday stood in front of the notice board with a middle-aged man called Girts; the two of them were calling out to people. Pushing his way through the crowd, Ryoma managed to get to the board, reading the paper patch plastered to it.

Isn't this the request the guy from yesterday failed? Weren't they called the Crimson Moon Brigade or something?

The reward written on the notice was one gold coin per person. It was quite the lavish reward. Owing to the sum being much higher than normal compensation, Girts was surrounded by a crowd.

As he crossed through the crowd on his way to the guild's entrance, Ryoma heard the men talking.

“Didja hear that, lads?! A gold coin for everyone involved! With eight of us, we can walk away with eight golds. Plus all the treasure and whatnot on the mooks we kill!”

“Dang... The guild's going all out with this one.”

“They ain't got no choice. Golaes screwed it up... Guild's gotta keep up appearances, y'know?”

“What?! Rock Wrecker Golaes failed this one?”

“Yeah. Apparently he offed some other group of bandits.”

“Oh, so he went to kill them without investigating. That's dumb... Well, whaddya expect from that rock-brained lunkhead? I mean, he's strong and all, but there's nothing inside that skull of his.”

“Hey now. If he hears you say that, he'll wring your head off.”

“Whoops... Me and my big mouth...”

The men standing around were all adventurers and mercenaries, it seemed. No shortage of malicious insults were being whispered all around.

Golaes must be feeling terrible right now. He didn't look like such a bad guy, either...

With heartless insults being whispered all around him, Ryoma headed inside the guild.

“I'm terribly sorry, but all the delivery requests between Melpheren and Alue are currently on hold.” The girl at the reception said, bowing her head deeply. “There are some urgent deliveries, but they're all rank C and above, so I'm afraid you can't take them, Mr. Mikoshiba.”

“Is it because of those bandits?”

He'd assumed this might happen, so he spoke to the apologetic reception girl with a smile.

“Yes. This failure greatly damaged the guild's dignity... And the governor's guards are being forced in on us, too... Ah! My apologies. Please forget I said that.”

Getting carried away with answering his question, she accidentally let slip some internal affairs of the guild. Placing her hand on her mouth, she looked up at Ryoma with a questioning look.

So the governor's got quite a bit of influence around here, does he... Hardly surprising.

Even a massive organization like the Guild, with a network spread out across the continent, had to be considerate of the nobles. Ryoma nodded with satisfaction, having gotten a glimpse into the inner workings of things.

"Oh, no, I didn't hear a thing. That said, is there any work I can take on with my rank right now?"

While there was no pressing need to take on more work, he wanted to gain as much experience as he could, since it would benefit him down the line.

"Well, I think the only work you could take on right now are just rank F and E hunting requests." She said apologetically, folding the documents in her hands.

"F Rank missions don't give me points toward raising my rank, but offer twice the pay, right?"

"Yes, exactly. Those beasts would overpopulate if someone doesn't periodically hunt them down. People at higher ranks wouldn't take the requests without some kind of bonus, and those in low ranks are limited in how many they can hunt down. The guild can't really afford to throw money around too much, but it's something of a public service." She had something of a resigned smile as she spoke.

She was evidently displeased that the guild had to take losses over this. She may have understood this was necessary, but she didn't quite consent to it personally.

"Is there a deadline for these requests?"

"Hunting requests under rank B typically don't have time limits."

"Really?"

"Yes. So there's no loss in accepting all the hunting requests you can under rank B."

"I'll take all the rank E hunting requests, then." Ryoma said after pausing to consider her words.

Since they have no restrictions or time limits, I should take these requests whenever possible... Best to earn money whenever I can.

"Very well. I'll refer you to this, then."

The receptionist handed him a book.

"What's this?"

"A glossary of monsters you'll have to hunt at rank E requests, how much they pay, and their habitats. There are a total of twenty hunting requests you can take at rank E. Explaining them all verbally would take too long, so for rank E and above, we produce glossaries

and hand them out when people first take hunting requests. Be sure to read it thoroughly.” She said with her biggest smile of the day, as Ryoma flinched at the sheer girth of the tome she had given him.

“Haah... Fine.” Ryoma was clearly exasperated.

Having almost screwed up once before, he didn’t have any option but to read through it.

“I’ve recorded the requests on your card, so the formalities are taken care of. Good luck.”

I’ll just skim through it and try to get the gist of what I need to know...

Placing the book in his sack, Ryoma left the guild.

It happened two hours after Ryoma left Melpheren. The highway led into a dense forest. The road was wide enough for three carriages to drive through side by side, but as he looked toward the forest, the trees seemed to be growing thickly. They blocked off the sunlight, making the area rather dim. Also, perhaps because of the threat of bandits, there was no one walking along the highway.

Ryoma Mikoshiba was the sole person walking down this road right now.

Man, I’ve got a bad feeling about this...

A highway enclosed by thick foliage. The ideal place for soldiers to lie in ambush, and equally ideal for bandits to attack.

It’ll be fine... Right? I mean, it’s the middle of the day...

But Ryoma’s attempt to convince himself crumbled like a sandcastle at the sound of a girl’s screech, sharp enough to rip through silk.

“Kyaaaaa!”

“Shut up! You gonna be quiet or not?!”

“No! Let me go!”

“I said, pipe down already!”

It was just as the road took a sharp turn to the right. Ryoma quietly snuck toward where the voice came from. Rushing over to a large tree near the turn, Ryoma hid behind it and observed what was going on.

He saw a carriage that seemed to have been attacked, and several men who had two girls grabbed by their hair. He could also hear the vulgar conversation going on between the men.



“Heheheh, huge haul today. But hey, is it just me, or is none of that good stuff rolling our way these days?”

“You got that right. We stocked up really good at that village yesterday, too.”

“The women were pretty decent, for the sticks, at least. Not like we got a round with them, but still...”

“Well, what’re ya gonna do. If we’re gonna sell them, the used goods are gonna get us less than new ones.”

“I’m tired of doing middle aged hags, man. I’d kill for something young like those ones, see?” One of the men pointed at the girls and laughed with a smirk.

“Ahahaha! Can’t argue with that!”

“Hey, hands off the merchandise!” One of the others said as a man grabbed the blond girl by her arms. “The boss’ll have your heads for this!”

“Aww, c’mon. Look at how good they are and tell me you don’t want a piece of that.” Another man said, pinning the silver-haired girl’s arms behind her back.

“He’s got a point. Sides, the stuff in this cart hits our quota for the month and then some.” The man rummaging through the carriage’s contents came out, looking around at his companions.

That prompted them to raise their voices in agreement. The men’s restraint was completely broken by the girls’ beauty.

“If you dare lay a hand on us, we’ll bite our own tongues off!” The silver-haired girl called out valiantly, apparently losing her patience after hearing what the men said.

“Ha!” The men’s smiles didn’t waver in the slightest. “We know you slaves can’t off yourselves or resist, so long as you have that collar on!”

The girls went pale. They didn’t expect bandits to know about that. Just like the man said, the power of that collar restricted the girls’ actions, as slaves weren’t allowed to commit suicide or resist.

“But just to be on the safe side... Hey, someone stuff a cloth in their mouths!”

“Stop! Leave us alone!”

The two desperately tried to shake off the men, but were no match for them in terms of raw strength.

“Hey! We don’t have to tell you what we’ll do to the other woman if you don’t start acting like a good girl, do we?”

The sight of a sword being thrust in the direction of the other girl prompted the silver-haired girl to cease her fervent struggling.

“But man, your master’s a real cold blooded bastard, isn’t he? The moment we attacked, he just took off with his bodyguards.” The man

who threatened the silver-haired girl taunted the two.

“Can’t blame him, can you, Gates? Getting away from the Crimson Moon Brigade alive takes luck.”

“You ain’t wrong!” The man called Gates burst out into a fit of laughter.

“Whoa, check it out, there’s 500 golds in here!” The man who had gone inside the canopy to scavenge for goods called out.

“Whoa, I can’t believe it. He’s right...”

“Are these seriously all gold coins...?”

Aside from assorted outfits and jewelry, there was also a chest full of mostly gold coins. It seemed the men didn’t expect their haul to be that good, as they gradually started cheering.

“So! Got quite a pull here, I’d say. So that means we can do whatever we want to these girls, right?” One of the men said, his voice dripping with lust.

As if pulled in by his words, the other men spoke up in agreement.

“Yeah, I think so, too. We got so much money and jewels, no one’s gonna complain if we bring some damaged goods too, right?”

The sight of the small mountain of gold in the chest had erased all traces of restraint from their heads.

“But what if the boss finds out...” One man among them said cautiously with a concerned expression.

They seem to have feared their boss quite a bit. But Gates simply regarded that man with a warped smile.

“That ain’t a problem. We’ll just off the whores once we’re done with ’em. How can he get mad at us if he doesn’t even know they were part of the loot?”

Those words made the one man that seemed to be hesitant about raping the girls smile in obscene expectation.

One, two, five... There’s seven of them... All right, how do I take care of these guys...?

The conflict was raging inside Ryoma’s heart. The men were standing in a small clearing some ten meters away from the large tree, and their outfits weren’t radically different from what the mercenaries and adventurers he saw around town wore. They were clad in armor and had weapons in hand.

But their expressions were that of cruel predators. The kind that would rape, harm, steal from and hurt others, filled with confidence and haughty pride in their own strength. That faith hung over their faces like a shadow.

Those are faces only a mother could love...

In sixteen years of life, Ryoma had never seen anyone make the sort of disgusting, animalistically lustful expression they were making.

What now? Should I save the girls? It probably wouldn’t be wise to get

involved in any needless trouble, though...

Ryoma was torn between his desire to save them and the desire to abandon them in the name of self-preservation.

I might not run into any further trouble if I do save these girls now, but then again, there's a chance that I might... And I'm definitely gonna have to certainly kill all seven of these guys if I do... If even one of them got away, he'd call for backup. Could I really manage that? If I attack from this distance and they use the girls as meat shields, then I'd really be out of luck...

A reason to save them. A reason to abandon them. His own safety. His sense of justice. His pursuers from the Empire. Many factors crossed his mind, as he listened to Gates's vulgar ramblings.

He wants to rape them, and then kill them...

Those words filled Ryoma's mind with wrath and the urge to kill.

Man, why am I even thinking about this so much? Do I really want to leave chuds like these alive?

Those honest feelings rose from Ryoma's heart.

Could I really leave these girls behind and go back to my world? Would I be satisfied with that?

He'd intended to do anything to get out of this screwed-up world he'd been summoned to and find a way back home. He'd even thought to himself that he'd find a way back home even if he had to kill everyone in this world to do it. But when mulling over the possibility of allowing two girls to be raped and murdered right in front of him, he realized he wasn't as single-minded as he thought.

I've already got blood on my hands, and I don't regret that. The assholes who summoned me here, tried to enslave me, and tried to make me fight for them? Their lives don't mean shit to me. If I ever make it home, even if people judge me, I'll tell them all that I did the right thing. "I did what I had to! You have no right to complain," I'll say. But if I just leave these girls to die, can I say the same thing then...? Fuck that. Never mind what other people might think, I'd never be able to forgive myself.

As cold and relentless as he could be when it came to fulfilling his objectives, Ryoma was fundamentally a good person, with the common sense and perception of justice one would expect of a decent, modern human being. But if anything set him apart, it was his resolve.

The resolve to pursue that justice, even if it meant separating his enemies from their souls, may have been the one thing that made him different compared to most people.

Taking his chakrams out of his sack, he moved through the forest towards the ideal position to launch a surprise attack. If his preemptive attack were to fail, the odds would be overwhelmingly against him. And this time, his face wasn't hidden. If even one of them got away, they'd bring reinforcements and retaliate.

I don't have much of a choice if I'm gonna increase my chances of success... Sorry, girls.

Ryoma mentally apologized to the girls, who were on the verge of crisis. Perhaps he was merely trying to mentally justify doing this, but...

Ryoma moved to the southern side of the forest, to a position that gave him a better view of the men and the girls. There were ten meters of distance between them, and the men couldn't see Ryoma through the branches and leaves which hid the road from view.

Are those bastards going to rape them right here, in the middle of the road...?

At first Ryoma thought they might move somewhere else, but the men intended to do the deed right there and then, in the middle of the road. It had been some time since they'd attacked the carriage, but they didn't seem to mind. Even considering this was an empty road in the middle of the forest, their confidence seemed strange, if not outright brazen.

Goddamn animals...

Staring at them in disgust, an uncomfortable feeling overcame Ryoma. But he shook off those feelings and waited patiently, restraining his anger and desire to kill all the while.

Then it happened.

"All right, so it's decided! This is our little secret, lads. If the boss finds out, it'll be all of our heads on the chopping block, after all!" Gates said, prompting everyone else to nod.

"Alrighty, let's start with the blondie, then!" So said the man restraining the golden-haired girl.

"I'll take the silver one, then!" The other men started speaking enthusiastically.

"Hey, Gates, what are we gonna do about these guys?"

"Aaaah? Let 'em do whatever they want. Though I'll be taking the silver girl's virginity for myself."

"What?! Gates, you asshole, who died and made you king?! Her first time is mine!"

They were so horned up that they broke into a lowbrow argument, before eventually deciding on an order.

"You there, tyro. Keep watch. Well, the guild's subjugation forces are being organized and the Empire's army hasn't moved, so there's nothing to fear, but another sucker might show up, so keep your eyes peeled! And the guys going second, hold the girls' arms tight!"

The men moved out at Gates's instructions.

So he's the head honcho, then.

Ryoma clenched the chakram in his fist tightly.

"All right!"

The men took off their sashes and lowered their pants down to their knees, exposing their privates. That was what Ryoma had been waiting for.

Now! Die!

The moment the men's bodies were about to obscure those of the girls, Ryoma fired off a chakram. Cutting through the window, it whizzed toward Gates.

"Guah..." A splash of blood burst from Gates's mouth.

The chakram Ryoma had fired sunk itself into the back of Gates's defenseless head, lodging into his skull, and his body collapsed on top of the girl.

Ryoma fired his remaining chakrams from behind cover, and then charged out of the forest. He was aiming at the men who were pinning down the girls.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

"Geeeeeeeeeh?!"

One chakram sank into one man's brow, and another into the other man's throat. Unfortunately, the next man avoided the fourth thrown chakram by ducking his head, letting it sail over him.

Three down, four to go.

Ryoma had a valid reason to wait until right before the girls were going to be ravaged; he was waiting for the bandits to disarm themselves. If a man intended to rape a woman, he'd have to take off his pants. And since they were also wearing sashes, that meant they'd have to remove the swords on their waists as well.

Ryoma had, of course, considered the emotional damage it would inflict on the girls, but he had to win, and the most surefire way to dispose of the men was to wait until the moment they were about to start. Ryoma made a gamble, with victory or defeat leaning on that single moment. And the risk had paid off.

His preemptive strike took out the group's leader, Gates, and threw the enemy's formation out of order. Their weapons were thrown to the ground, along with the sashes they had removed to rape the girls, and some of them still had their pants hanging around their knees. It was impossible to reflexively prepare for battle in those positions.

The guards were some distance away, so Ryoma had to beat the men pinning the girls down first.

"What? What's going on?!" The men guarding the highway ran over, having noticed the disturbance.

"Were you morons even watching?! We're under attack!" One of the men shouted, his face distorted with lust and rage.

"The hell are you?!"

"Don't mess with us. You just made enemies of the Crimson Moon

Brigade!”

Ignoring the men charging at him, Ryoma rushed to the girls’ side.

“You fucker, how dare you shrug us off. Die!” The man who had dodged the chakram stopped pinning down the girls and drew his sword.

Holding it over his head, he swung the blade down at full force down toward Ryoma’s skull. Ryoma’s sword, which he held under his arm, intersected with the blade. The sound of metal clanging and sparks spread out. A sword swung down. A sword brandished up. But the one that won over was the sword brandished upward.

The man aimed at Ryoma’s head, but Ryoma aimed at the man’s sword itself. That small difference was what tipped the scales of this exchange. While he’d managed to stop the sword from being flicked away, the man’s right hand was pushed back, and then a wet sound - like a watermelon being cut in half - echoed through the forest.

Ryoma’s sword swung down, crushing the man’s head.

Three more!

He’d reduced the group of seven to less than half their starting number, but the effect of the surprise attack was wearing off by now. The three that were in charge of keeping watch rushed back, weapons in hand, and were looking for a chance to strike.

They’re not charging in... Shit!

They were in a stalemate. In terms of martial skills, the three bandits were no match for Ryoma. They likely had ample combat experience, but they weren’t skilled in martial arts. Their formation was perfect, though, and didn’t allow for any openings Ryoma could take advantage of.

Ryoma returned his sword to his scabbard, kneeling as he waited for his opponents to make a move. His glare clashed with theirs.

The way this is going, it won’t end well... I have to go for it!

Ryoma broke his stance and suppressed his bloodthirst for the bandits. With his sword still in his right hand, all the force drained from his muscles, and he walked up to the bandits slowly. In contrast to how savage he was before, there wasn’t a hint of emotion in Ryoma’s features. Like a doll, there wasn’t a hint of prana to his expression.

“S-Stay away!”

“What are you thinking?!”

It took the bandits by surprise. Ryoma’s body was completely loose, and open to attack. He looked like an attack could easily do him in. He moved calmly, one step after another... When one of the bandits finally lost his temper.

“A-Are you making fun of us?! Die!” He shouted angrily, bearing down his sword on Ryoma’s head.

The moment he did, Ryoma's body slipped to his right, and blood spurted out of the attacking bandit's neck.

"Wh-What did you do?!"

In Ryoma's hands was a naked sword, dripping with blood, which he'd apparently drawn at some point. But what rattled the other bandits wasn't dread from his swordsmanship, but the fact Ryoma's expression remained as still as it was even as he slew a man and was stained all over with his blood.

And this surge of terror clouded the bandits' judgment. It was hard to deal with them when they acted together in a formation, but when fear and anxiety overcame them, they forfeited their means of survival.

They held up their swords, abandoning their formation, merely focusing on the enemy before them like mere animals. Ryoma slashed over one of the bandits' exposed torso, and used the momentum to slash the final one diagonally from the shoulder.

"Whooooo..."

With the final one cut down, Ryoma flicked the blood off his blade and returned it to its sheath. Looking around, he sighed heavily.

I managed it, one way or another...

"U-Um... Excuse me?" A voice suddenly spoke from behind him.

Ryoma turned around, catching sight of the girls running toward him.

"Oh, your face!" She said, using her sleeve to wipe the blood splatter off Ryoma's face.

"My apologies. I am the older sister, Laura."

"And I am the younger sister, Sara."

The silver-haired girl introduced herself, followed by the blond girl.

"Right. You two okay?"

"Yes, we are. We thank you for saving us." They said, bowing their heads in gratitude.

"No, I'm sorry you had to go through something like that. I should have come in to save you much sooner, honestly."

Even if he did do it to save them, he did deliberately let things get to the very moment before they were ravaged. The fear would likely leave lasting marks on their hearts.

The girls, however, shook their heads at Ryoma's words.

"Don't apologize, sir. The fact our bodies remain undefiled is all that matters."

"It is as Sara says. No amount of thanks will suffice... We truly are grateful to you." Laura supplemented to Sara's answer, and the two of them once again bowed their heads.

"Hearing you say that is more than enough...!"

Ryoma once again stared at the girls, taken aback by their beauty. Their skin was light brown and their features were perfectly chiseled. Their limbs were supple, and their ample breasts made Ryoma terribly aware of their femininity.

They were dressed like Arabian dancers, but the collars and shackles stood out more than anything.

I can see why the bandits lost their heads from seeing them...

But at the same time, something about these girls felt off to Ryoma.

What's with them, anyway? Are these girls stronger than those bandits?

The shape of their muscles, the way they carried themselves and the watchfulness in their gazes. They all gave the impression that the girls were skilled martial artists. In Ryoma's eyes, they didn't seem like fragile, dainty existences who would be so easily raped by those bandits.

"Um... Is something the matter?" Laura asked, feeling Ryoma eye them suspiciously.

"Oh. Ah, sorry. Just thinking about something. Do you girls have a last name, by the way?"

He had his suspicions, but asking now would be unwise. Ryoma spoke to them with the most pleasant voice he could manage.

"Slaves have no family names..." Laura's reply made Ryoma's expression distort.

He'd assumed as such from the collar, but this world really did have slaves.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." Ryoma regretted asking that insensitive question.

"It is fine. Do not let it bother you." But even as the girls said that, there was a shadow over their expressions.

An awkward silence hung over the three of them.

Damn... I shouldn't have asked that...

He knew he had to say something to mend this situation, but he had little experience with these sorts of things. No matter how much he racked his brain, it felt like anything he would come up with would only make things worse.

What eventually broke the oppressive silence was Sara's voice.

"Um... If you wouldn't mind, could you tell us your name?"

He was so caught up in his own thoughts that he forgot to introduce himself.

"Oh, oops. Sorry. My name's Mikoshiba, Ryoma Mikoshiba."

"Mikoshiba... Master Mikoshiba. Allow us to thank you again. You have truly been a great help." The two bowed their heads yet again.

"Don't mention it. Well, that aside, what will you be doing now?"

Do you want me to escort you to Alue?"

Their response, however, surprised Ryoma.

"No... Our apologies. We cannot move away from here without orders from our Master."

Those unexpected words made Ryoma's thoughts grind to a halt. Their expressions didn't seem joking, though.

"...Are you for real?" He asked them, almost timidly.

Ryoma was so confused he'd spoken in his most casual, unrestrained manner.

"Yes." The two of them nodded in unison.

"And where is this Master of yours?" Ryoma examined the attacked carriage, but none of the corpses lying there seemed to be the right person.

"Our Master fled along with his bodyguards when the carriage was attacked."

Sara's answer left Ryoma astonished. They were obeying the orders of an owner that left them behind and ran?

"So let me get this straight. This Master fellow just ran off and left you behind?"

"Yes."

"And that's why you're staying here?" He asked, hoping to be answered in the negative.

His prayers went unanswered, though, and it was the kind of hunch Ryoma wished was wrong that ended up being proven true.

"Yes. We cannot move unless our Master orders otherwise." The two nodded, and Ryoma raised his head, looking upward.

C'mon... This has to be a joke.

This was, honestly speaking, a rather irritating development. For all Ryoma cared, he just wanted to take these girls back to town, get away from there as soon as possible and bid the two farewell. There were his pursuers from the Empire to consider, and the two of them were suspicious enough to boot. But so long as the girls insisted on not moving, going back to town wasn't possible. And he couldn't drag them all the way there either, obviously.

Well, not much I can do. I guess I'll help the girls set up camp and leave them the food. They'll have to take care of themselves after that...

Realizing there was no changing the girls' minds, he gave them instructions to start setting up camp. Leaving them in the heart of the forest like this left a bitter taste in his mouth, of course.

Well, I'll do what I can to help them.

He knew this was hypocrisy on his part, but he could only do so much. As he had the girls prepare the camp, Ryoma carried the bodies of the bandits and what seemed to be dead bodyguards. He figured leaving them there wouldn't be wise, but that lead to a more alarming

development.

As Ryoma dragged the second corpse to the trees, thirty meters away from the highway, the sound of a girl's scream reached Ryoma's ears.

That was Sara's voice! What's happening?!

Ryoma dropped the corpse he was carrying and ran back to the campsite. Looking between the trees, Ryoma caught sight of the road.

"Did you really think you'd get away with this, you cheeky whores?!" One of the bandits, his armor stained with blood, screamed while riding on a horse with Sara carried under his arm. "I know what you look like! We'll chase you down wherever you go and kill you!"

Dammit! I could've sworn I killed him! Ryoma clicked his tongue.

Still, cursing to himself wasn't going to change anything. The fact of the matter was that the bandit who'd had his stomach slashed by Ryoma had grabbed Sara and was trying to escape on horseback.

Ryoma took out a chakram from his sack and took off after the bandit.

Not yet. He's too far.

Although he was in a hurry, the tree branches were getting in the way and weren't allowing him to run freely. Chakrams were a powerful weapon, but they had one flaw: their range was much shorter than a bow.

A common bow's range was roughly sixty meters, but a chakram could only manage ten meters at best; they were compact and could be fired in succession, but their range left much to be desired. By the time Ryoma reached the highway, the bandit had already spurred his horse to gallop and had a twenty meter advantage on Ryoma.

"Shit!"

Ryoma looked around, but there were no other horses. Though even if there were, Ryoma had no experience with horse riding and wasn't likely to catch up with the bandit anyway.

"Master Mikoshiba!" Laura caught up to Ryoma, blood trickling from her mouth. Perhaps the bandit had punched her.

"Don't worry. I'll think of something!"

"No." Laura shook her head at Ryoma's attempt to soothe her. "I have a request to make of you."

"A request?"

Her expression was surprisingly lacking in fear, despite her little sister having just been abducted. And even as Ryoma eyed her dubiously, she continued speaking clearly.

"Yes. My apologies, but would you mind cutting the ring finger on your left hand?"

"Sorry to ask, but what for?" Her words made Ryoma doubt whether Laura actually understood the situation they were in.

“Please. There’s no time.” Laura’s expression did seem grave in its own way to Ryoma.

The urgency in her voice spurred him to do as he was told, and he nicked his left ring finger against the tip of his sword.

“Is this good enough?”

“Yes!”

Laura then took Ryoma’s sword and used it to cut her own left hand’s ring finger, then knelt before him.

“Exalted God of light, Menios. Lend your ear to my pledge.”

Is she... praying?

“I offer up my body, my heart and my soul to my master.” Laura continued speaking, even as Ryoma stood there dumbfounded. “All shall be as my master wills it! Now, Master Mikoshiba, present your left hand.”

Guided by Laura’s words, Ryoma stuck out his finger before her.

“By mingled blood, my oath is forged.” Laura said as she brought their ring fingers together, and their blood mixed together.

A sharp light emanated from Laura’s neck. Her collar crumbled away soundlessly, and the shackles on her limbs were released as well.

“Good, I can move! Come, we must hurry!”

Laura’s limbs filled with strength. Ryoma could almost feel her muscles harden like steel within her supple, feminine body.

“My Master, please permit me to make use of my power.” Laura said.

Ryoma didn’t understand what was going on, but was spurred by the intensity of her gaze to nod. Seeing that, Laura began chanting.

“Spirits of wind, gather at my side and grant us speed to stride as a gale! Wind Protection!”

As Laura called out, concluding her incantation, a green light enveloped both of their bodies.

“Come, Master. We must take Sara back!”

“Take her back?” Ryoma’s gaze wandered to the distance. “We can’t catch up to a horse from here...”

The bandit riding on the horse already had a two hundred meter gain on them.

“We can still make it!” Laura called out, and began chanting yet again. “Spirits of wind, gather at my side. Abide by my will and cut down my foe. Wind Slash!”

As she concluded her incantation, Laura swung both arms horizontally, and blades of winds emanated in their wake, which then took off in the direction of the bandit. The bandit heard the sound of the wind slicing through the air, and felt something cut into his flank.



“What... Shit! She’s using thaumaturgy! Is that guy a thaumaturgist too?!”

As he spurred the horse to gallop faster with one hand, suppressing his wounded flank with the other, the image of Ryoma’s face surfaced in the bandit’s mind.

Still, cursing under his breath wasn’t going to change the situation any. With each horizontal swing of Laura’s arm, a blade of pressurized air burst forth and flew in his direction.

“G-Goddammit!”

One of the blades finally mowed off the horse’s hind leg, and with its right leg gone, the horse collapsed to the ground.

“Now, let’s go.” Confirming from afar that the horse had collapsed, Laura took Ryoma by the hand.

“H-Hey, wait a minute.” The moment he took after Laura, who was pulling him by the arm, Ryoma realized something was off.

His body rushed onward with feather-light nimbleness. It only took them ten seconds to catch up to where the bandit had been incapacitated. Looking back at the distance they’d just covered left Ryoma shocked. It was a distance and speed that would be impossible even for a sprinter who held the world record.

Is the wind she used earlier... the same power that geezer had? It definitely was. So what is this...?

“It is wind thaumaturgy.” Seeing Ryoma’s confusion, Laura regarded him suspiciously. “Do you not know of it?”

Who is this man? Could one so skilled with martial arts not know of thaumaturgy? No, that shouldn’t be possible. But...

In this world, those who held power had a close relationship with thaumaturgy. It was a necessary technique for the strong to remain strong. Most everyone would know that. Even if they lacked the aptitude to use it, it was common knowledge to all.

I can’t say I don’t know about it.. Ryoma was stumped by Laura’s words. *But if I say too much, she’ll see through my lie. What do I do?*

A deafening silence lingered, only to be dispersed by a voice calling out to them.

“Laura.” It was Sara.

“Are you alright, Sara? You’re not hurt?”

“Not at all! I braced myself for the fall, so I’m fine.”

She braced herself? I suppose it might not be impossible, but getting up without a scratch from falling off a galloping horse...?

Just as Ryoma had assumed, these sisters were extremely skilled.

“I see. What about the bandit, Sara?”

“His leg was squashed under the horse and he can’t move. What should we do with him, Laura?”

“That is for my Master to decide.”

Understanding the situation, Sara gave a small nod, and the two turned their gazes to Ryoma.

“Me?”

Well, not like there's much to think about here.

Ryoma saw little merit to be had in keeping the bandit alive.

“Fine, I’ll decide what to do, but no complaints, got it?”

Seeing the two of them nod, Ryoma pulled out his sword and approached the horse.

“Fuck! My leg! Get off me, you shitty horse!”

Ryoma could hear the sound of the bandit cussing and kicking as the horse neighed loudly.

“Y-You...” The bandit’s features washed over with terror as he noticed Ryoma approaching. “S-Stay away! Back off, stay away from me! Don’t come any closer!”

Ryoma kept on walking, though. All the color drained from the bandit’s face when he saw the sword in his hands.

“H-Hey, l-let me go, please. How about money? You want money? Or maybe women? I can get you women, too!”

But Ryoma continued his silent advance, his countenance unmoved by the bandit’s words. With his face as expressionless and unmoving as a mask, he did nothing but draw ever closer.

“Why, you...! Where do you get off being so quiet and stuck-up?! The Crimson Moon Brigade has more than a hundred members! You think you can make enemies out of us and get away with it?!”

Ryoma raised his sword, as if he hadn’t heard the threat at all.

“W-Wait! We’re not just ordinary bandits. We’re privateers, approved by the kingdom of Xarooda! If you lay a hand on us, you’ll be picking a fight with them, too!”

The bandit shouted on and on, and then, Ryoma finally parted his lips to speak.

“Are you fucking dense?”

“What?” The bandit simply asked back, surprised by Ryoma’s breaking of the silence.

“If I kill you here, who’ll be left to tell anyone it was us? What’ll you do, snitch on us to that Xarooda kingdom of yours from beyond the grave?”

As Ryoma stated the obvious, the bandit merely stared at him dumbfounded.

“The dead can’t do anything. Not that I was planning on letting you stay alive anyway.”

“S-Stop.” The bandit said, his face pale with realization. “Please, don’t. I’ve got a little girl at home!”

It seemed villains acted the same way in reality as they did in

fiction. They accosted the weak, but begged those stronger than them for mercy. If this were some sort of fictional story, the bandit's words may have struck a chord of sympathy with the protagonist, making them hesitate. But unfortunately for him, Ryoma was not that naive.

"Maybe you have a kid, maybe you don't. It's all the same to me." Ryoma said, his expression refusing to change. "But don't worry. Unlike you shitstains, I'm decent. I won't go after your daughter."

"No..." The man's face contorted with terror. "Dooooon't!"

A merciless blow of steel rained down on the bandit's head.

"Are you sure disposing of him so quickly was wise?" Laura called out to Ryoma as he sheathed his sword.

"Is there a problem?"

It seemed that, of the two sisters, Laura was the one more primed to do the talking.

"No, but there was a lot you might have wanted to ask him."

There were quite a few significant things the bandit said. Ryoma, however, shook his head.

"No. Honestly speaking, I didn't really care. Besides, there wasn't any basis to judge if anything he said was true."

"Basis to judge...?" Laura regarded him quizzically.

Perhaps, Ryoma wondered, she was the naive type, who tended to believe everything she heard. He left that unsaid, though.

"I'm not enough of a softie to swallow any old story a bandit like that would try to feed me. And honestly, I don't care if he was telling the truth, either... That said, I'm glad we got your little sister back safely."

"Thank you very much, Master."

The sisters bowed deeply before Ryoma. He'd saved them twice in one day, and any person would be grateful for that. But as he accepted their gratitude, Ryoma asked about something that had been bothering him.

"Well, you're welcome. But more importantly, what's with this 'Master' business you've been going on about?"

Ryoma wasn't the sort to get excited at other people calling him 'Master.' To be frank, it made him uncomfortable.

"You made a blood pact with us earlier, did you not? You've become our lord and owner, and so we naturally refer to you as Master."

As Laura made her proclamation with her chest puffed up in pride, numerous questions popped up in Ryoma's head. After some thought, he recalled how Laura had asked him to cut his ring finger earlier.

"Blood pact... Was that the thing from earlier, with the cut fingers and the blood?"

“Yes.”

As Laura nodded staunchly at Ryoma’s question, Sara stepped forward.

“Master, would you exchange a blood pact with me as well?”

“Yes, that’s right. Master, you should form a blood pact with Sara, too.” Laura nodded at her sister’s words, as if it was a given.

Well, then... What the hell did I get myself into here?

It felt like the conversation was moving ahead regardless of Ryoma’s will, leaving him in the dust. He found himself looking up to the heavens.

“Sorry, but can we not? I mean, you don’t have to serve me or anything.”

Ryoma’s words probably came like a bolt out of the blue, because the girls’ faces filled with sadness.

“Wh-Whatever for...? Do you find us that loathsome?”

Sara’s eyes filled with tears, and Laura’s expression clouded over. But Ryoma wasn’t speaking out of affection, or lack thereof, for them. Anyone would naturally be taken aback if they were suddenly told they were the master of a slave.

“No, that’s not the issue here.”

“It isn’t?” The girls gazed up at Ryoma.

Having two girls of unparalleled beauty looking at him like that certainly was causing a conflict in Ryoma’s heart. He pushed that aside and asked, while swallowing his words of consent.

“Weren’t you waiting for your owner here earlier?”

“Now that I’ve formed a blood pact, I no longer need to listen to that man’s orders.” While that was certainly what had happened earlier, Laura shook her head in denial. “However, Sara is still bound to his thaumaturgy, so she cannot move from here. That is why we asked for you to form a blood pact with her.”

“Which would mean we could go back to town?”

““Yes. Only if we form a blood pact.”” The two said concurrently, nodding strongly.

Well, guess I don’t have much choice. I’d rather not leave the girls here, after all.

Ryoma couldn’t help but feel spiteful at his tendency to get himself caught up with some trouble when he was already a man on the run. Still, he couldn’t leave them to die if he had the means to help them.

Especially when they were such peerless beauties.

“Fine.” Ryoma heaved a heavy sigh. “Let’s do that blood pact thing. After that, we’ll sift through the carriage, take everything of value and head for Alue. If we set out now we should get there at eight in the evening. But when we get there, could you give me an

explanation that's a little more convincing?"

"As you wish." The sisters' relieved voices echoed against the trees.

After Ryoma made the blood pact with Sara, they returned to the carriage and started sifting through the items the bandits had taken.

"Oh, wow. There's some expensive looking stuff in here."

Aside from the chest full of gold coins, there were also several crates full of hair ornaments and bracelets decorated with what seemed to be rubies and sapphires.

"Slaves are dressed up for when they're sold. Doing so makes them more appealing, and also increases their price."

"Hmm..."

Judging by the size of the carriage, there had likely been ten or so slaves.

"These gold coins were gained from selling the other slaves."

If they were as pretty as Laura and Sara, Ryoma could see how they'd fetch such a sum. The girls eyes' filled with tears as they remembered their friends who had been sold.

The sudden sound of footsteps from across the trees cut into their conversation.

"Laura, Sara!"

Ryoma's voice prompted the girls to pull out the swords they'd retrieved from the dead bandits. They stood on either side of Ryoma, with him taking the center of this effective, if impromptu, formation.

Is it monsters? Or are there still more bandits left?

But contrary to Ryoma's expectations, it was an ordinary person's voice.

"Boss! Over here!" One man pushed his way out of the trees and onto the highway.

Looking to and fro, he spotted Ryoma and the twins. With surprise in his eyes, he turned around.

"Oh, we finally found it! What about the luggage? The goods?!"

Following that man, three men in armor appeared. And the voice they'd just heard came again from behind them.

"Looks like the bandits got away. But the carriage is wrecked, eh...? The goods seem to be fine though, eh. Everything's right here."

"What? Laura and Sara! So they *are* alive! The bandits didn't defile them, did they? Their value would be quite depreciated if they became used goods, you know!"

"Don't think you gotta worry about that, but we might have another problem, eh." The man fixed his gaze on Ryoma.

"What? What are you talking about?!"

"Boss, it looks safe, so just come out already."

"Is it really safe?!" As the voice spoke, they could hear the sound

of someone stepping over the grass.

That's a person?

Ryoma's question was, sadly enough, a natural one to ask. What came out of the greenery was a pig 170 centimeters in height and over 200 kilograms in weight. His physique was akin to that of a potbellied sumo wrestler, except it didn't look like there were any developed muscles under all that fat. All that lard was the result of insufficient exercise and overeating.

He wore nothing on his torso save for a sleeveless vest, with a turban bound around his head and white Arabian pants. He looked like some kind of merchant ripped straight out of the Arabian Nights.

So that's the slave merchant. I can definitely see him running off and leaving the twins behind...

Seeing this pig made everything click. They'd likely been ambushed and, not caring for appearances, the pig took off with his bodyguards. Ryoma couldn't see his obese form evading the bandits' blades otherwise.

"Oh, so you two are all right! I was worried the bandits had defiled or killed you, or at the very least taken you away!" The pig said, as he approached the twins.

His carefree attitude made it clear he was confident they couldn't lift a finger to harm him.

"Stay away!" Sara brandished her sword at the slave merchant.

"If you get any closer, we'll cut you!"

But the girls' threats were only met with mocking snickers from the merchant and his bodyguards.

"Say, boss. The girls are being awfully indignant, eh?"

"Indubitably so. It seems they've forgotten their place as my slaves. Perhaps I haven't disciplined them well enough."

"Hey now, missies, maybe you forgot, but this man right here is your owner. You belong to him. What makes you think you can point a sword at him?"

"Shut your mouth! We don't belong to you anymore!"

"Gahahaha!" The pig man's face contorted with ugly lust at the sound of Laura's threat. "I don't know what put that idea into your heads, but you belong to me. You're my precious merchandise that I spent a good five years polishing up."

Each time he laughed derisively, his fat stomach undulated.

"You left us here to die and ran for your life!"

"Of course I did. What's the point of me clinging to my merchandise if I end up getting killed for it? But I'd also go back to pick up any merchandise I left lying around. What's wrong with that?"

There was certainly some sort of logic to the slave merchant's words. The act of picking up something you dropped made sense... so

long as said ‘something’ wasn’t a slave.

Seeing the merchant and his bodyguards not showing a hint of remorse at Laura’s shouting, Ryoma felt his anger flare up. They only saw other people as objects. They had the sort of ugliness one had to see with their own eyes to truly understand.

“Now, now, boss. Leave this to us.”

“That’s right, eh. They might be strong, but without a master they can’t use their thaumaturgy.”

It seemed the men didn’t think Laura and Sara could use their power. The situation was five against three. They were at a disadvantage, but depending on how things went down, they were capable of overcoming this. If they could just kill the slave merchant, the head of the group, the rest would work out.

“Looks like that boy there filled their heads with nonsense and now they’re getting cheeky with us.” One of the bodyguards shot a nasty glare in Ryoma’s direction.

“Oh, I see, so you’re the one who put those dumb ideas into the girls’ heads, are you? Some white knight in shining armor you are. Well, so be it. We took some pretty big losses from the bandit attack, so I could use an extra slave. Capture the boy alive, men! He’s got a good physique. He should fetch a good price as a manual labor slav—Ghrck!”

A splash of blood spurted from the merchant’s mouth. A shiny ring had lodged itself into his girthy neck at some point. Ryoma had silently fired off a chakram, which tore through the slave merchant’s neck and cut off his sentence.

The bodyguards stood frozen in place, unable to process the sudden attack that had just transpired.

Seriously. What a blithering idiot.

Ryoma couldn’t see him as anything but a fool for going on endless tirades in front of someone who was clearly bent on killing him. There were no rules in battles to the death; there was only the question of who survived and who didn’t.

Just go ahead and hand me the chance to kill you on a silver platter, why don’t you...

Some corner of Ryoma’s heart filled with scorn at the dead pig, but now he was in the middle of a battle. Stifling his mocking, he focused on what had to be done.

“Now!”

Responding to Ryoma’s call, the twins rushed forward from his side, with their swords brandished. They passed by Ryoma’s sides, charging the stunned, uncoordinated bodyguards.

Like I thought.

The result he expected was playing out before his eyes. Each of

the girls had their own particular style of swordplay. Laura's was one of force. Her sword swung down rapidly on the opponent's blade, snapping it at the root, and sinking into the man's head with that same momentum.

Sara's skill, by comparison, lay in her technique. As the opponent thrust their own sword out instinctively, her sword clashed with it and drove the opponent's own blade into their throat.

Their styles juxtaposed strongly with each other. But Ryoma could tell they had both gotten to this point owing to long and arduous training.

"Wh-What the hell are you... How are you this strong?!"

The brains of the group, the slave merchant, was dead, and the surprise was enough to throw off the bodyguards, leaving them open to attack and allowing the twins to easily dispatch them. Only the man who'd rushed out to the road first remained in front of Ryoma.

"Hmph! So you're the only one left." The girls' cold gazes fell on the remaining man.

"W-Wait up... Hey." He seemed to have finally understood the position, as his eyes filled with panic. "Wait, how? How can you use your power...? You can't use it without a master!"

The bodyguard's words made the girls' lips curl with smiles full of scorn; the smile of a beast confident in its victory. And yet, they remained as alert and ready for battle as before, with their muscles strained and at the ready to deflect any attack the bodyguard might send their way.

"This man is our Master!" The girls' gazes fell on Ryoma.

"That's bullshit. Slaves can't just... make a blood pact with someone on their own..."

"We learned how to bind a blood pact when we were young. Have you forgotten where we descend from? Our father taught us."

"What?!" The man went pale at Sara's words. "Then why haven't you done it until now?!"

"We don't owe you any explanations!"

As Laura said that, Ryoma approached the man slowly.

"Kuh. Shit! I won't forget this, you bastards!"

The man decided to take one last gamble. He turned around and took off as fast as he could.

Not a bad call... But he screwed up. Ryoma thought to himself as he watched the man's retreating back.

He wasn't running into the forest, but rather down the road. There were monsters in the forest, and that threat eliminated it as an option of escape. But Ryoma took out a chakram and wordlessly flung it into the back of the man's head. The sound of the chakram cutting through the wind and sinking into the man's skull filled the forest.

“Now, then. I have a lot to ask, but let’s get to Alue first. We can talk then.” Ryoma told the twins after retrieving his bloodied chakram.

““As you wish.”” They bowed their heads, and proceeded to put the dropped valuables into order.

It showed they knew what they were supposed to do.

I only wanted to help them out, but somehow it looks like I ended up getting in way over my head.

Ryoma sighed, watching the two girls obey his orders.

After carrying the corpses of the slave merchant and his entourage into the forest, Ryoma and the girls took all the jewelry and valuables they could find and made their way to Alue. Thankfully, they didn’t run into any more bandits or monsters, and arrived after 10 in the evening. All the eateries were already closed, and so Ryoma decided to stay at the single inn at town.

“Right, let’s talk while we eat. Come on, don’t stand around, go ahead and take a seat.”

Sitting before them was some stew and bread the innkeeper had graciously heated up for them. Ryoma thought he’d made a fairly simple request of them, but the girls eyed the chairs he motioned toward with confusion.

“What’s wrong? It’s gonna go cold.” Ryoma asked the girls dubiously as the twins exchanged glances.

“It is not permissible for slaves to eat at the same table as their master. We will eat later.”

“Huh?” Ryoma asked back at Laura’s answer.

“It is not permissible for slaves to eat with their master.” As Sara repeated the same words, Ryoma gazed at her face intently.

Is she serious?

It was far too foolish of a statement to believe.

“Um... Not permissible, you say...? You’ve got stew right in front of you. It’ll go cold.”

“It is not permissible for slaves to eat warm food.” Laura replied, as if she were stating some obvious truth.

What the heck’s up with these girls... Are slaves really that concerned with what their master says? But I’m their master... I guess that means... Hey, hold on a second!

Ryoma, who had no experience with subjugating people, found the twins’ attitude to be all too heavy.

“So let me get this straight. You have to obey your master, correct?”

““Yes. It is the duty of a slave to serve their master.”” They answered Ryoma’s question in unison.

Their words didn't have so much as a hint of hesitation. They believed that from the bottom of their hearts.

"And I'm your master, right?"

"Yes. You are the Master we've formed a blood pact with." Laura said, with Sara nodding silently in agreement.

"Right. In that case, this is an order from your master. Sit down and dine with me!"

"“Huh?!”" The two exchanged surprised glances.

"Food's only half as good if you're eating it alone, you know? Plus, I want to discuss what we're doing next. So sit down!"

In all honesty, he could hardly stand to eat a lavish meal alone with the twins gawking at him like this. It was unbearable. The sisters fell into contemplative silence for a moment.

"...Very well. Our apologies. Come, the Master has spoken. Let us sit down." Laura, who seemed to have steeled herself, urged Sara to sit.

"All right, let's talk over dinner, then!"

"“As you wish.”"

Ryoma was of the mind that eating together would be more fun, but the girls seemed to be uncomfortable with the idea. After eating a spoonful or two of stew, they put their utensils down.

This is awkward... Well, from what I've heard so far, it looks like slaves get treated worse than I imagined. I'm not gonna get them to change immediately.

Old habits die hard, as the saying goes. Putting that matter aside, Ryoma decided to ask about the blood pact. Perhaps it wasn't an ideal topic to discuss over dinner, but Ryoma couldn't leave that loose end untied.

"So, let's recap where we stand right now. I know I'm repeating myself by asking this again, but I've become your master now, right?"

"Yes. The blood pact we forged earlier has placed us in a relationship of master and slave."

"Yes, about that! Tell me more about that blood pact thing." Ryoma asked, furrowing his brows as he chewed on some bread.

"The blood pact has two purposes. The first is a ritual of loyalty, done between a knight and their lord. In that case, it is merely a formality, and it has no binding power. The other one is done between warrior slaves and their masters."

"Warrior slaves?" Ryoma returned the bread in his hands to its prior position on the table and looked at Laura.

"Yes. In addition to labor slaves and sex slaves, there is a unique type of slave known as a warrior slave. As the name implies, they are slaves used to fight battles, and since they naturally possess the power to fight, they have the means to revolt against their masters. As such,

all warrior slaves have a seal placed on them, forbidding them from all hostilities without explicit permission from their master.”

Laura’s explanation made Ryoma’s heart wash over with disgust. Ryoma couldn’t stand the idea of people violating the wills of others. Everything Laura was telling him right now came off as nothing more than people forcing their wills on their slaves. If they feared the thought of slaves revolting against them, it simply meant they were treating them in ways that would cause the slaves to revolt.

“I see. Next question, then. How were you able to make that pact?”

If Laura’s explanation was true, there was no way for slaves like them to know how to make a blood pact. If all of them could, the whole system of managing slaves would collapse under its own weight. Ryoma asked this question for one simple reason; this could have been a trap by the Empire. Perhaps they were sent for Ryoma to save them, so they could build up his trust until he left himself open to attack.

“Th-That’s...” Sara stuttered. It seemed that, for whatever reason, she didn’t want to answer Ryoma’s question.

But after exchanging a glance with Laura, she fell silent.

“It is fine, Sara. It is only natural that he would be suspicious. Very well, I will tell you. We only ask that you keep this story to yourself and tell no one else, Master.”

Seeing the grave, unyielding resolve in her eyes, Ryoma nodded vigorously. He wasn’t the type to spill other people’s secrets, anyway.

“Our surname is Malfist. It is the name of a lineage of knights that was in service to the kingdom of Quift, which once existed along the central continent’s western coast.”

A lineage of knights? So they’re nobles, from the higher echelons of society. They’re definitely pretty and refined, but how did these noble princesses become slaves...?

Laura’s somber story went beyond Ryoma’s imagination.

“So your real name is Laura Malfist, right?”

“Yes. The Malfist house was a long-running clan of warriors that has served the Quift royal line for generations. We were greatly trusted by the royal family, and our lineage often stood as the crux of national defense. But that ended roughly five years ago. A dispute with a long-running neighbor and trade partner, Shadora, led into outright war, which brought the kingdom of Quift to destruction. Our father’s land was an island off the shore of the kingdom, but even that place was not immune to the spread of the fires of war.”

Tears glistened in the girls’ eyes, perhaps from the memory of what had happened.

“Our father fought desperately to defend the citizens and the

kingdom. But when the king was assassinated due to betrayal from the prime minister's faction, the war was turned in Shadora's favor, and Father was forced to abandon our territories."

"And that's when you both managed to escape?"

"Yes." The twins nodded. "He assigned us several soldiers as guards, and sent us to the border to flee to another country."

"But if he gave you guards, how did you end up slaves?"

"That is because all of us... including ourselves, were poor judges of character."

"Laura..."

Ryoma's question made the girls' faces distort in anger, humiliation and regret.

"We failed to see just how weak people's hearts can be. It happened one night, as our boat, disguised as a trade ship, crossed the border to a neighboring country. Our guards tied us up, and sold us to the slave merchant Azoth. Despite all of them being well trusted knights, who had served us well for years..."

The guards they had trusted betrayed them and sold them into slavery. It really did sound tragic. And as they say, misfortunes never come singly, and one bad thing leads to another.

I feel for them, but I can't exactly blame the people who betrayed them, either...

That thought surfaced in Ryoma's mind. The bodyguards who sold them were trying to cling to their own lives. Having the family line collapse was like having your company go bankrupt. If you were to ask the employees to care for the CEO's family after the company went under, it would never happen.

That kind of bond could only last for as long as money flowed. That was what Ryoma thought, but he wasn't so foolish as to put that thought into words. Staving it off, Ryoma progressed the conversation.

"So that slave merchant, Azoth, was the guy we met this afternoon?"

"Yes. We knew how to read and write, and had basic training in martial arts and thaumaturgy, so he had us trained to become warrior slaves."

It made sense that they learned how to fight if those were the circumstances. Ryoma could see why they would be made warrior slaves, too.

"I see. So, how did you know how to make a blood pact?"

Ryoma's eyes glimmered. That was the biggest question.

"When we were younger, our father taught us how to perform the blood pact. He said it may come to be of use to us."

"He did that... in case you gained your own slaves?"

They'd originally been in a social position that would employ

slaves, so they knew how to bind slaves in a contract.

“Yes. However, slaves cannot perform a blood pact with other slaves. We needed to find someone who was at least a civilian to form the blood pact with.”

Ryoma nodded. That made sense. If slaves could form blood pacts with other slaves, the whole system wouldn't be able to bind them. And it wasn't like any random commoner would do. They'd have to pick the right person.

“You were looking for someone trustworthy... So, that means you trust me?”

“Of course. You fought all on your own to protect us, and I thought you were a worthy man for us to serve.”

“I felt the same way.” Sara nodded gently, reinforcing Laura's words.

“Aaaah.” Ryoma sighed heavily, having heard their explanation.

Well, what do I with them now...

Those were Ryoma's honest feelings. The twins' gazes were fixed on him.

“I understand your story. But if that's the case, I'll just set you two free. We got the money from the slave merchant, so you two can use it to start your new lives.”

Ryoma was on the run from the empire; having to care for the two of them would only be a hindrance.

“We cannot!”

However, Ryoma's words were met with clear rejection from Laura.

“Even if we have become slaves, we still have the pride and blood of Malfist running through our veins, and you protected our lives and chastities despite risk of death. Let us serve you, until our lives are at an end.”

The girls' eyes were alight with strong resolve.

“No. Listen, I didn't save you just so you'd be grateful to me. You don't have to go this far.”

Of course, he didn't mean they shouldn't feel grateful at all. He expected at least some words of gratitude at the bare minimum, but this was going too far.

“No! Let us serve you!” Laura said, as Sara nodded in agreement.

“Well, damn... I've got my own circumstances to consider, you know.” Ryoma said vaguely, only for Sara to cut into his words.

“Is that... related to you being an Otherworlder, Master?”

“What's that?” Ryoma said, the smile persisting on his face.

Still, the twins picked up on Ryoma's agitation from the minute changes in his demeanor.

“You've nothing to worry about. We have no intent of telling

others. We simply want to learn of your circumstances.”

A brief silence fell over the room.

“Why?” Ryoma eventually asked.

“If we are to serve you, Master Ryoma, we need to know of your circumstances. So we ask that you share your situation with us.”

Another long silence lingered.

What do I do? I could kill them to prevent them from talking, but... No, that'd be stupid. I've already gone to all this trouble of refusing to abandon them. I've been prepared for this the moment I chose to save them... Right.

Conflicting emotions ran across Ryoma's mind.

“Alright, fine.”

““Do you mean it?!””

Ryoma's words prompted the girls to lean over the table, and Ryoma raised his hands to stop them.

“I understand how you feel, but personally, I don't need slaves. So if you choose to follow me after I tell you everything, I want you to do it not as slaves, but of your own free will.”

He didn't want them to come along out of their obligation as slaves, but as people with their own wills and choices. That was the optimal conclusion Ryoma decided on. The sisters exchanged a glance after hearing his decision, and then, Laura proclaimed in a loud voice.

“Very well. If that is our Master's will!”

Their way of thinking hadn't changed much, it seemed.

Ryoma told them of that fateful day when he'd been summoned to this world; how, after being summoned, he slew the thaumaturgist who summoned him; how he was on the run from the Empire's pursuit; how he had the advantage of them not knowing what he looked like; and how he was now planning his next move.

But even after clearly detailing the dangers of traveling with him, the twins didn't seem to have changed their minds. Quite the contrary, in fact.

“If they do not know what you look like, traveling alongside us will make it even harder for them to notice your flight, will it not? They would assume you do not have any allies in this world.”

Such was her proposal. After seeing their resolve to accompany him, hearing the advantages of their traveling with him, and saying he would eventually release them from their servitude, Ryoma decided to allow the sisters to come with him.

“Are you sure you want to come with me? I'm planning to leave this world as soon as I get the chance to, you know.”

Ryoma had no intent of staying in this world for much longer. Even if no one knew how to send him back to Earth, Ryoma intended to find a way how from nothing if he had to. Such was his resolve.

“In that case, we will remain by your side until the day you find your way back home.” Laura said, a smile on her face.

“Laura.” Sara, who stood next to her, parted her lips to speak. “Could we not also go to Master Ryoma’s world?”

“My. Yes, that is an option. A wonderful idea! That way, we’ll always be able to serve him.”

Sara’s words made Ryoma’s expression turn aghast.

Now just a damn minute... Take them back with me? Gramps would have my head on a pike... never mind what Asuka might do.

But without regard to Ryoma’s inner conflict, the sisters grinned happily.

Well, I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it. I should focus on getting across the border for now.

The next day, Ryoma’s group of three went through the town of Alue, stocking up and gathering gear for the journey ahead. The sisters were most used to a fighting style that used scimitars in both hands, but sadly, no one in Alue sold those.

Since armor didn’t fit them (for how large their bosoms were, their hips were slim), they made do with buying swords and throwing knives.

What was truly staggering, however, was the inheritance from the slave merchant, Azoth. They brought the gold coins to the bank, and as expected, there were five hundred of them. They carried the necklaces and jewels to a gem dealer, who named a startling cost.

“The grand total is three thousand gold coins.”

““““Huh?!”””” Three stupefied voices overlapped in the gem dealer’s shop.

“Are you displeased with the price? Frankly, this is as much as I can give...” The gem merchant apparently took their exclamation to be not surprise at the cost, but disappointment that it was too little.

“Ah! No, no... It’s fine.”

Ryoma knew there were a lot of rings and necklaces in the chest, but he never imagined it would fetch this much. Hearing Ryoma’s response, the gem merchant smiled.

Huh? Is this guy... trying to rook us?

Perhaps he thought Ryoma and the twins to be amateurs, and unjustly tried to buy the jewels off them at an unfairly low price. That said, Ryoma had no idea how much they really cost, and carrying so much precious metals with him when he was on the run would be a risk.

“I see! I’ll be taking them all, then. However, I’m afraid I don’t have that kind of amount on hand... Would a transfer to your account be acceptable?”

“Yeah. Um...” Ryoma glanced at the twins.

It wasn't hard for Ryoma to figure out he was the only one of them with an account.

"Take this, then."

Of course, even while using his account was the only option, he felt guilty at having it all transferred to him. But upon seeing the sisters nod, he handed over his card.

"Before we register you at the guild, we'll need to stop at the bank."

"The bank, Master?" Sara echoed Ryoma's words.

The two of them didn't really have much knowledge when it came to being an adventurer.

"Yes. You need to have an account before you register, so they can reward you for completing missions."

"Is that a fact?" The sisters' faces were filled with surprise and respect.

This person really is amazing. He was summoned only a few days ago, and he already knows more than we do.

While Laura was bowled over with admiration, Ryoma's footsteps suddenly came to a stop.

"Right, here we are."

Ryoma passed through the entrance of the bank, facing the main street.

Thirty minutes later.

After opening accounts in the bank, the three of them headed for the guild, and the girls completed their registration. On top of that, the three of them also learned of some important information in the guild and headed back to the inn.

The Empire was blockading the borders. When they registered the sisters at the guild, they intended to advance to the next town, Adelpho, only to be forced to change their plans.

"We need a backup plan."

"Yes, I believe going to Adelpho would be a poor idea." Laura said.

"I agree." Sara nodded. "If it were a normal blockade, we could pass through by paying the stationed forces generously."

"Princess Shardina, huh..."

"Yes." The two nodded at Ryoma's words. "The blockade is commanded by the princess's direct orders, so bribery is unlikely to work here."

Money could solve most problems, but with the princess being in direct command, it wasn't likely a bribe would tempt anyone. At worst, they could be beheaded on the spot.

"So do we keep going... Or do we retreat..."

A map of the empire's territories they bought in the tool shop was

spread out on the table before them. It was for civilian use, so it only showed the locations of the cities, the roads connecting them and the rough distance between them, but it was better than nothing.

“If we’re retreating, we’d have to go south...”

To get to the southern border, they’d have to go southwest of Alue through the monster-ridden forest, return to the capital and go further south from there. Cutting through the forest would diminish the distance, but since they were likely to encounter monsters, the distance would be more or less the same.

“No... I’m not going south. The Empire’s likely to be most wary of the southern border.”

That border was the closest one to the capital. His pursuers would naturally assume that Ryoma, being on the run, would prefer to take the shortest path possible out of the country.

“Which leaves the north and west...”

The expression on Laura’s face clearly showed she wasn’t in favor of that, and the reasoning behind that was apparent from a brief glance of the map. They were both too far. According to the map, the distance between each of them, if one were to go in a straight line, was 500 kilometers. If they were to go on foot, at 30 kilometers per day, it would take them half a month to get there.

If they were willing to waste their time crossing that distance, it would be wiser and safer to simply wait for the heat of the pursuit to die out, and the blockades to be lifted on their own. That said, if they were to simply wait, there was a chance the Empire would resort to deploying its massive manpower to flush Ryoma out. Considering the dangers, it was clearly better for Ryoma to cross the border as soon as possible. The sisters understood that well enough, too.

“I guess our only option is to keep going towards the eastern border...”

The sisters nodded.

“I have an idea about that.” Sara said, and two sets of eyes fixed their gazes on her.

“You’re going to suggest going off the highway?” Laura asked, prompting Sara to nod back.

“While we may have no choice but to cross the eastern border, we don’t have to go through Adelpho to do that. If we choose to enter the forest over taking the highway, we should be able to cross into the neighboring kingdom of Xarooda. What say you?”

Sara moved her finger from Adelpho’s location on the map to a forested area north of it, which led into the kingdom of Xarooda.

Not a bad idea, but...

Ryoma couldn’t shake off a certain concern. Sara’s suggestion was sound and had no flaws to speak of, but an inexplicable anxiety

gripped his heart.

If the princess was smart enough to predict I'd rather go east and closed down the border because of that, wouldn't she consider the possibility I might try to go off the highway?

This world's highways were protected by warding barriers which only extremely powerful monsters could hope to cross, so traveling along the highways allowed for safe passage. That was written in the guild's booklet as well.

But that didn't mean using the highways was the only option. Those who were confident in their skill and willing to forgo staying in a pleasant inn in favor of spending the night in the forest were welcome to travel off the main roads. Few would make that choice, though. The only ones who would were either criminals, adventurers or spies; people with particular reasons and circumstances.

Judging from how swift her decisions had been up to this point, Princess Shardina was a sharp-minded woman. She wouldn't neglect to consider the possibility that such people might choose to cross the forest. That said, judging by the information he had picked up along the way, there weren't that many pursuers heading to the eastern border. It was unlikely they'd be able to handle the entire stretch of land the forest occupied. In that regard, Sara's suggestion still seemed workable.

But if they were to be discovered, they'd be arrested without a doubt. The Empire's soldiers didn't know what Ryoma looked like, which would conversely make any man of large build a suspect. If so, even with Laura and Sara accompanying him, it was unlikely they'd let him go.

I don't see them letting me walk away just because Laura and Sara are with me... In which case, there's no point in us going together... No, wait a second...

A faint thought surfaced in Ryoma's mind. The Empire's forces weren't aware of the Malfist sisters. They wouldn't be detained so long as they weren't traveling with him. And when he considered that, an idea flashed in his mind.

"Sara, Laura. Let's go with crossing through the forest. But..."

As Ryoma spoke with a cruel smile overtaking his lips, the girls' eyes widened with surprise.

All right. It's about time I taught you who's the one being targeted here, princess.

That was the moment when the hunter and the hunted exchanged their roles.

Chapter 4: The Hunter and the Hunted

The sound of the foliage being crushed under boots filled the forest. It had been a day and a half since Ryoma entered the forest north of the town of Alue. The twins weren't in sight. After they concluded their preparations for the journey, Ryoma left for the forest off the highway all on his own.

The forest was governed by darkness. The sparkling of the stars failed to penetrate the veil of the trees, and without fire to light the way, it would be impossible to see anything.

"So far, so good..." Ryoma whispered to himself, illuminating the big tree roots at his feet.

He'd only been with the twins for two days, but he was feeling their absence already. Surely no one would judge him for getting sentimental after being thrown into an unfamiliar world.

Ryoma looked around cautiously, chewing on the beef jerky he'd bought in town. A day and a half of being off the main road had taught Ryoma well enough how menacing it could be, even though there naturally weren't any enemies Ryoma couldn't handle. He'd gotten off the highway, but it wasn't that large of a detour.

Their numbers were overwhelming, however. Every time he'd beaten a monster, the scent of its blood attracted another one, resulting in a vicious cycle. He hadn't been aware of it the other day when he was hunting the wild dogs, but being able to retreat to the safety of the highway and rest his nerves was a major boon. However, now that he was forced to fight monsters in such fast succession without time to pause for breath, the strain was bearing down on him.

They're finally here?

As Ryoma rested his body near the fire, he felt movement in the air and a gaze being fixed on him in the darkness, and it didn't feel like a monster. The piercing gaze from the shadows felt almost adhesive.

Ryoma doubted it was another adventurer who'd decided to cross through the forest, either. If they wanted to rest by the fire, they'd just call out to him. And if they were to notice that he'd clued into their presence, they'd think him to be a bandit and launch a preemptive attack.

On top of that, it wasn't the gaze of a bandit. There was no greed

in it. There was certainly a sort of unpleasant stickiness to it, but it didn't feel to be based on the desire to take another's money.

Ryoma placed a hand on his sword's handle. Whoever it was, if they intended to attack, Ryoma was ready to cut them down. It was then that a man's voice spoke from the darkness.

"I seem to have startled you. My apologies."

Ryoma tightened his grip on his sword.

"Now, now. No need to be so cautious. I'd just like a moment of your time."

His manner of speech was decidedly vexing. His words were polite, but somehow had a pressure to them that left no room for argument.

"Fine. But come out slowly." Ryoma said.

A moment later, he could hear the sound of the branches being parted. When Ryoma saw the face of the man approaching opposite of him illuminated by the fire, a certain doubt filled his heart. His hair was carefully combed, and he had a longish, oval face. His height was roughly 175 centimeters, and he gazed at Ryoma with serene eyes hidden behind a pair of silver-rimmed glasses.

He looked like a salaryman, the kind you could find countless examples of in some Japanese business district. Except, of course, you'd be hard-pressed to find a Japanese salaryman clad in armor and carrying a sword.

"Hmm, is something the matter?" The man asked, seemingly having noticed Ryoma's discomposure.

"It's nothing... I just thought, you don't look much like a bandit."

"My, my." The man smiled. "You say some troubling things. Mind if I sit over here?"

Without waiting for Ryoma's response, the man sat opposite of Ryoma.

"I don't recall saying you could."

Despite Ryoma's admonition, the man didn't seem apologetic. On the contrary, he took the chance to start talking.

"Now, now. I just need to ask you two or three questions, and then I'll be off."

Ryoma seemed to have resigned himself to the fact that nothing he could say would change this, and motioned for the man to continue.

"I imagine you're an adventurer, but I'd like to know what you're doing in a forest off the highway. Are you doing work?"

"I heard in Alue that the border checkpoint was blockaded." Ryoma answered the man's question honestly. "And apparently no one knows when it'll be lifted, either, so I decided to cut through the forest. I'm pretty confident in my skill, you see, and I came prepared

to camp out.”

“Oh... Is that right? Still, I can’t say I find it all that commendable. Confident as you may be in your sword arm, crossing through the forest all on your own... Are you in a hurry of some sort? Perhaps, you’re being pursued by someone?”

The man’s eyes narrowed, his gaze turning sharper. There was a glint in his eyes, as if he was trying to see through a lie.

“No, there’s no hurry, but I’d rather go ahead and accumulate experience over just sitting around in town waiting for the blockade to lift. Besides, hunting monsters will net me money.”

“I see, I see...”

It was Ryoma’s turn to direct a probing gaze at the man.

“And who are you, to demand this kind of information out of me?”

Ryoma already had a pretty clear idea of what was going on, but he still asked, feigning ignorance. The important part was to not rouse the other party’s suspicion. At least, for the time being.

“Oh, my apologies. I go by Hideaki Saitou. I serve as vice commander of the Empire of O’ltormea’s Succubus Knights.”

“Oooh. Impressive...” Ryoma maintained his act, silently suppressing his doubts.

So it really was one of my pursuers, huh... But, Saitou? He does look Japanese, but...

Since he didn’t know the angle of the other party yet, he decided it would be most wise to pretend to be a mere adventurer.

“And what would you be doing in the middle of a forest, sir vice captain?” Ryoma asked with a hint of politeness, since he now knew the other person’s standing.

“You see, I’ve actually been in pursuit of a certain man. We suspect he may be trying to cross the border through this forest.”

“A certain man? What did he do?”

“Oh, I do apologize.” Saitou answered Ryoma’s interest with an utterly unapologetic tone. “It’s a confidential matter, and I can’t divulge the details to an outsider...”

That was what Ryoma thought he might say. He didn’t expect Saitou to tell the truth handily at this point; it would actually be worse if he did. It would be one thing if he were simply loose-lipped, but Ryoma knew what fate those who learned things they shouldn’t hear could very well end up facing.

But if he didn’t question Saitou here, it would come off as suspicious; as if he didn’t ask because he already knew something.

“Oh, sorry. What is your interest in me about it, then? You don’t suspect me, do you?”

As Ryoma spoke with an almost offended tone, Saitou shrugged in

a flustered fashion.

"No, no. I'm not suspecting you at all, but you see, we just don't know that man's face."

"What, you're chasing someone when you don't know what he looks like?" Ryoma raised his voice in surprise.

So they really don't know... Not surprised, though. I killed all the ones who saw my face.

Ryoma mentally confirmed the accuracy of his judgment. Common sense and morals meant nothing in this world; survival was everything.

"Yes, it's actually quite the hassle... My superior's pressuring me to catch him quickly and be done with it... And that's where you come in. I'd like to ask for your cooperation with something."

Saitou finished his words politely.

"My cooperation?"

"Yes. I'd like you to give me a bit of your time so I may confirm who you are. It's just a formality, yes? We'll confirm your background and you'll be off on your way. Not much we can do, see? Given we don't know what the person we're looking for looks like... We have to round up all the well-built men going through the forest. Really, I do apologize."

And while his words were the height of polite apology and spoken with a gentle smile, there wasn't so much as a hint of laughter to the eyes behind the silver rimmed lenses.

"And if I were to refuse to cooperate?"

"In that case, I'd be left with little choice." Saitou raised his right arm at Ryoma's words. "I would not like to do so, but I would need to have you accompany me by force."

An arrow was fired from the forest, piercing the air near Ryoma's flank.

"I see... So that's how it is." Ryoma muttered to himself, eyeing the arrow lodged into the ground.

"Yes. Now that you understand, I'd like to ask for your cooperation one more time. Would you come with me, please?"

Hypocritical courtesy at its finest. No one could say no in this situation when doing so would result in a hail of arrows from the forest.

"If you insist, then. I'll come along." Ryoma answered with a reluctant expression.

"Oh, I'm glad you understand. I'll escort you to my camp. Not to worry, it's close by." Saitou said, and took a pair of shackles out of his sack.

"What's that?"

"Just erring on the side of caution," Saitou replied apologetically.

“It’s all formalities, my friend; all formalities. I’ll take them off after you meet my commanding officer. Just be patient.”

He left no room for argument. Left with no choice, Ryoma presented his hands without another word.

“Your Highness, we’ve restrained him.”

Hearing Saitou’s words as he walked into her tent, Shardina stopped in the middle of penning together a decree and turned to look at him.

“Restrained? Restrained who...? The otherworlder?”

“Yes, I think there’s no doubting he’s an otherworlder. To be exact, he is a Japanese from Earth.”

After returning to the camp, Saitou left Ryoma in a tent and, after assigning some guards, went to report to Shardina. His expression was full of pride at completing his task, mixed with a hint of anxiety.

“...How can you tell he’s the otherworlder? We don’t know what he looks like.”

“He’s from the same country I came from.” Saitou met Shardina’s suspicious expression calmly. “And it hasn’t been long since he came to this world. I could tell by the smell.”

Saitou’s answer made Shardina’s face break into a grin.

“I see... I certainly wouldn’t dream of doubting your word. So, what are you going to do?”

“His Grace’s orders were to arrest or kill him, but...” Saitou said hesitantly, and Shardina nodded.

“Yes, the order was to kill him if we were unable to arrest him.”

“So, now that we have him, we would have to take him to the capital...”

Hearing Saitou’s words, Shardina peered at his face with surprise.



“Is there a problem?” Shardina was sensitive to the changes in Saitou’s expression.

“Yes... I’m of the opinion that we should forgo taking him back to the capital, and dispose of him here.” Saitou stated his thoughts after a hint of hesitation.

He had just proposed going against the Emperor’s orders. The pressure he must have felt was likely beyond one’s imagination.

And hearing his words made Shardina falter, too, because Saitou had always been supporting her from the shadows. His counsel had always been wise and apt, and had never been wrong before. Shardina couldn’t outright ignore him, but she couldn’t defy the Emperor’s explicit orders, either.

“State your reasoning...”

“My reasoning, you say...” Saitou considered her question gravely. “One could regard it as my intuition.”

This time it was Shardina’s face that drooped into a frown. Although she placed great trust in the words of her aide, she couldn’t defy an imperial decree based on intuition alone.

“Your intuition, is it... Even coming from you, I cannot act upon that itself.”

“My apologies. But upon speaking to him, I could not shake the feeling that he is dangerous. He would smile while talking to me, but I could not tell what he was thinking in his heart of hearts. And then he accompanied me without any resistance. Even when I cuffed him, saying it was simply a formality, he did not resist very much. Almost as if he was confident that if we looked into him, he’d be released...”

Hearing Saitou’s words made a shudder run through Shardina’s heart.

That does sound concerning. Especially the fact he did not resist... Judging from how he slew Gaius and started a fire to escape the palace, he should be a cool-headed, merciless man. Even if he’s resigned himself to the fact that he can’t run away, I don’t see him simply surrendering himself quietly.

“Are you sure he’s the otherworlder we’re after?”

Shardina suggested they might have found the wrong person, but Saitou shook his head.

“I have no doubt in my mind that he’s an otherworlder. The only question is whether he’s Sir Gaius’s killer, but judging by the situation, I’d assume a nine out of ten chance that he is. I think we can do away with the possibility that a completely unrelated otherworlder would be going through this forest by sheer coincidence.”

Shardina nodded at Saitou’s assertion. There was no evidence, but based on the circumstances, there wasn’t much room for doubt.

“Then, that leaves us with one option.”

“And that is?”

Shardina stood up from her chair and walked to the end of the tent.

“Take me to him. Clearly there is no choice at this point but for me to speak to him directly, is there not?”

Two visitors entered the tent allotted to Ryoma.

“Apologies for making you wait. My superior officer requested to meet with you directly.”

Shardina stepped forward from behind Saitou, facing Ryoma.

“I see. So I’m meeting the captain.”

As they listened to Ryoma speak, with him sat on a chair and directing a sharp gaze towards them, the two seemed surprised.

“Oh, what made you think I’m the captain? I could be some other kind of superior officer.”

“Well, I can’t say I knew for sure. But I heard Princess Shardina blockaded the checkpoint at Adelpho. And anyone who knows that same Princess Shardina is the captain of the Succubus Knights would come to that conclusion.”

“Hmm, I see. Yes, I suppose one would likely come to that conclusion...”

Saitou said, and while Shardina seemed convinced on the surface, her heart oddly stiffened. True, it wasn’t an unusual conclusion to come to, but would one truly think so clearly when they were bound and confined?

I think I see why Saitou was ambivalent about him. I don’t have a good feeling about this...

A sense of anxiety crept over Shardina’s heart. Saitou turned his gaze to her.

What do you think? Saitou’s gaze seemed to ask.

Shardina regarded him with a light nod and parted her lips to speak again.

“Thank you for lending us your time. I extend my thanks to you, in the name of the Empire.”

Those words were unbelievably polite, considering that royalty was addressing a citizen.

“No, it’s nothing to stress over. It was definitely suspicious for me to go through the forest and not the highway.”

Hearing Ryoma’s natural, casual response, the pair’s lips curled into smiles.

“Just as we thought, Your Majesty.”

“Yes. I’d say that cements it.”

The two exchanged nods. This cleared up any doubts they may

have had.

“We’ve finally found you, dear otherworlder!”

“What’s this about an otherworlder?” Ryoma regarded Shardina’s words with composure.

“Don’t try to deny it. No commoner in this world would react so calmly to a person of the Imperial house speaking to them politely.”

Upon hearing Saitou say this, Ryoma’s expression changed for the first time. That... did make sense. In this world where monarchy reigned as law, royalty were like gods to the commoners. If Ryoma had any intention of pretending to be a citizen of this world, he should have held his tongue and kept his eyes to the ground.

Ryoma’s attitude was polite, but only by Japanese standards. Even if it wouldn’t be seen as rude in this world, it certainly came across as Ryoma not knowing his place.

“Hmm... I see. Guess I screwed up there.”

Ryoma swiftly concluded that trying to talk his way out of this would be fruitless.

“I see we finally understand who is talking to whom here.” Saitou said, and Shardina nodded, turning to face Ryoma.

“I believe this is the first time we’ve come face to face. As you’re already aware, I am the first princess of the Empire of O’ltormea, Shardina Eisenheit. What name do you go by, dear otherworlder?”

“Me? It’s Mikoshiba. Ryoma Mikoshiba.” Ryoma answered her words calmly.

“I see. So you’re Japanese, like I thought.” Thus spoke Saitou.

“Certainly seems like you are too, Saitou.”

“Yes.” Saitou nodded. “I’m in the same position as you. I was summoned to this world ten years ago.”

“Oh? And you advanced to vice-captain rank in just ten years?”

“Well, let’s just say luck was on my side.” The man smiled bitterly. “Being an otherworlder has its merits.”

“The whole ‘power absorption rate’ thing?”

“Oh, I’m surprised you know that much.” Saitou’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Please. I just wrang a few facts out of the old man who summoned me.” Ryoma said, a cruel smirk on his lips. “Learned quite a bit from him.”

“Is that so? I hear the corpse was terribly mutilated. Did you torture Gaius?” There was a hint of anger to Shardina’s voice.

“Gaius? If that’s what you call the geezer who summoned me, then yes. I made him talk.”

Ryoma admitted to the torture right away. Perhaps he’d thought there was no point in hiding it.

“In that case, regrettable as it may be, we’ll have to put you to the

sword. We can't permit anyone who raises a hand against our Empire to live."

"Regrettable?" Ryoma met Shardina's words with apprehension. "What do you have to regret?"

"I hold people like you in very high regard. Even though you were thrust into the unusual situation of being thrown into another world, you escaped the capital, in spite of how unfamiliar it was to you, and got as far as the national border. That alone stands as proof of the unusual strength you possess. If your intellect and power would be put to use by our Empire, we would be one decisive step closer to conquering the western continent."

As Shardina finished speaking, Ryoma regarded her with scornful ridicule.

"Surely you jest. Me, serve you? I'm guessing that'd be as a slave, right? Spare me your stupid jokes."

He had the countenance of an enraged demon, contorting in anger, hatred and limitless urge to kill.

"Stupid, you say?"

"Yeah, you heard me. Who do you think I am, the hero in some story? Why the hell would I ever serve you people?"

Those were Ryoma's sincere, honest thoughts. The idea of obediently doing what he was told after someone summoned him to another world was insane. Shardina, on the other hand, scoffed at Ryoma's words.

"Is it not natural for the one who was summoned to obey the person who summoned them?"

Shardina's expression made it seem like she was simply pointing out common sense. For the people of this world, humans they'd summoned were nothing more than convenient tools, and no one would think to ask tools for permission before using them.

"Yeah, I kinda figured people in this world would say that."

Ryoma's statement made Shardina furrowed her brow. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing in particular. Talking to you people is a waste of breath anyway. But I will say one thing. I obey only one person, and that's myself. No one else. I think and decide on my own. That's all."

Ryoma had already judged that speaking to Shardina any further was pointless. Their ideologies and upbringings were far too different. There could be no agreement between them. There was a difference of heaven and earth between the two of them, and there was no chance of reconciliation from the very start.

"So, that's what you think... However, my dear otherworlder, this world isn't kind enough to accommodate your free will. True, you stuck to your desires. You slew Gaius. But where did that lead you, in

the end?" Shardina sneered at him. "You're sitting here, cuffed, in front of me."

Ryoma could make as many claims to pride as he wished, but it would come across as nothing but the wailing of a sore loser. His hands had been cuffed by Saitou, after all.

"Your pride is admirable. But does it amount to anything in this world, where the powerless are trampled and deprived? It's not as kind as your world. Your free will, you say? What would clinging to it give you? Had you simply obeyed the Empire, you could have been promoted like Saitou was."

"Heh. Sorry, but being your dog and barking on command doesn't sound appealing." Ryoma mocked Shardina's words.

"I see. You are a foolish man. You have the gall to talk like that even in this situation, do you? I might've spared you had you begged for your life."

As Saitou listened to Shardina's conversation with Ryoma, the anxiety in his heart only grew stronger.

She's right... Why is he so confident even now? Anyone else would be on all fours, begging for their lives.

A premonition of something bad approaching crossed Saitou's mind as Shardina spoke. He knew she was lying, of course. Even if Ryoma Mikoshiba were to beg for mercy, his fate had already been sealed; he was to be put to death. No other options were available for the man who killed Gaius and besmirched the Empire's dignity.

But it was only human to cling to the slightest shred of hope, even when faced with death. And despite that, Ryoma Mikoshiba remained unfazed.

Is he prepared to die?

But Saitou couldn't see any sorrow at having coming to terms with death in Ryoma's face.

What is this, then? Does he think he can make it out of this situation alive?

Shardina was accompanied by thirty troops. Twenty-six of them were deployed to search the forest in groups of two. There were only four other soldiers left to defend Shardina's camp. Since Saitou discovered and brought Ryoma back alone, there was a total of six of them there.

These numbers were more than enough to restrain a single otherworlder. But despite them holding all the advantages, he couldn't shake off the anxiety. At that moment, Saitou's mind came up with a possibility.

Wait... Did he end up in this situation because he wanted to be here?

It was a crazy, completely unfounded thought. But that only made it feel all the more true to Saitou.

That's right... if that's the case, everything clicks into place. But why? What kind of merit does this man gain from this situation...? No, whatever merit he gets doesn't matter. We have to kill this man, right here and now. Whatever he can do in this situation won't amount to much that way.

Saitou's hands moved to remove his silver-rimmed spectacles, and revealed in their absence were the cold, bloodthirsty eyes of a murderer. There wasn't so much as a hint of the calmness he had before in him. His eyes glinted with sharp light, like an unsheathed sword.

"Saitou...?" Shardina noticed the change in his attitude. Bloodthirst emanated from his body, as if he was standing on a battlefield.

"Her Majesty, I do apologize, but we should kill this man, right here and now."

"Wh-What are you saying?!" Shardina couldn't hide her surprise at the fact this was what her aide had said after such a prolonged, contemplative silence. "We need to deliver him to the Emperor!"

"No, Your Majesty. This man is dangerous. If we let him continue to draw breath, who knows what he might do..."

"Do you intend to go against His Grace's orders?!"

"I am sorry. Rebuke me as you will after this..."

So Saitou said, unsheathing his blade as he stepped towards Ryoma.

"Wait, Saitou!"

Ignoring Shardina's calls, Saitou raised his sword.

"Any last words? Since we were both born in the same place, I will at least hear you out."

"No, nothing in particular." Ryoma said with a faint smile, not flinching from the drawn blade shining down on him.

"I see. You've got nerve, I'll give you that."

"Nah, not that much at all... Considering you're the ones who are going to die!" Ryoma's shout reverberated through the night air, disappearing into the dark forest.

"What's gotten into him...?!" Shardina couldn't hold back her surprise at Ryoma's roar shaking the tent.

"What is... Ah! Your Majesty!" At that moment, Saitou's intuition cried out in alarm.

The moment Saitou's body covered Shardina's, a gust of wind swept over the tent. The gale shook the camp, tearing the tents to bits as if a giant sword had run rampant across the place.

A few seconds later, Saitou got to his feet after confirming the wind had died down.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!"

"I'm fine... What happened?"

Shardina, who was hidden under Saitou's body, rose to her feet, holding her head with her arms.

"You're fine, Your Majesty! Damnit... That bastard!" Saitou, however, ignored Shardina's words and wheeled over, looking for Ryoma.

His gaze fell on an unfamiliar, silver-haired girl.

"Are you unharmed, Master?" The girl said, swinging her sword to cut away Ryoma's shackles.

"Yeah. Your timing was perfect. You saved me, Sara. What about Laura?" Ryoma asked, rubbing his now freed wrists.



“Laura is disposing of the other soldiers. Just as you said, she’s capable of taking care of them without any trouble.”

As those words were spoken, a second voice spoke from behind Saitou.

“I’m already finished, Master.”

It was a young girl’s voice.

“Your Majesty!”

At Saitou’s cry, Shardina took a swift step back behind him, so they stood back to back.

“You’re not hurt, are you, Laura?” He asked with a voice of gratitude and concern.

“Yes, I’m fine. I simply needed to fire spells at them. These people were wary of an animal’s attack, but didn’t expect thaumaturgy.”

“It can’t be... thaumaturgy?!” Saitou cried out angrily at Laura’s words.

That was something neither Saitou nor Shardina had anticipated. The fact that Ryoma even had allies in this world was unpredictable, but it was particularly shocking that they could even use thaumaturgy. Few people could employ it in this world; those who served the empire were at least at the rank of a knight, and only the most skilled of adventurers or mercenaries were capable of it.

That was why this very scarcity stood at the foundation of this world’s structure of power. Just by being able to employ thaumaturgy, one was twice as strong as those who weren’t, and one’s skill could make that power all the more dangerous.

With the right preparations, Gaius, the man Ryoma slew, was capable of leveling entire armies. But having great destructive power didn’t mean one would always win. His murder at Ryoma’s hands stood as grave proof of that.

Still, that did not change the meaning of holding the power of thaumaturgy. And whatever the case, there was no way that a man who’d just been summoned from another world would be capable of using it, and it was extremely unlikely he would gain the company of someone else who could. At least, it had been until now.

“Who in the world are you...?!”

“We are servants of our Master.” Laura said, answering Shardina’s question while pointing her sword in her direction. “Enemies of our Master are our enemies.”

This girl’s skilled! And...

Seeing Laura’s stance made Shardina’s intuition cry out in warning. The two girls stood before them, their bloodlust and aggressiveness palpable. Only a handful of the thousands of soldiers under Shardina’s command were a match for them.

Still, in terms of skill, Shardina herself was higher than them. All the same, the eyes of the girl standing before her burned with deathly resolve. She would kill Shardina, even if she had to die trying. Saitou felt an equal measure of resolve from Sara.

What's going on here... Why are such skilled thaumaturgists on his side? He's only been in this world for a few days...

Capturing Ryoma was an absolute order from the Emperor to Shardina and her subordinates, but that only applied if their lives weren't at risk. They weren't obligated to take him alive if it meant Saitou or Shardina would be killed or injured in the process.

They were both in extremely important positions for the Empire. Perhaps it would be different if this were a battlefield where the fate of the Empire hung in the balance, but they couldn't afford to die at the hands of some unknown otherworlder.

"Saitou... We need to retreat..." That was Shardina's conclusion after much deliberation, which she whispered to Saitou so Ryoma and his group wouldn't hear it.

"Yes. With so many unpredictable factors at play, we need to pull back and reassess the situation... Assuming they let us go..."

"Yes... But we can't afford for either of us to die here. With Sir Gaius dead, either of us dying would strike a blow to the Empire's war potential. And if that happens..."

"The surrounding countries and occupied territories would see this as an opportunity to rebel."

That was the price the Empire had to pay for conquering their neighbors with brute force. It was obvious that if the Empire were to lose its superior strength, the oppressed citizens and nobles under their control would rise up in revolt. Several thoughts ran through Shardina's and Saitou's minds.

"If you want to retreat, feel free to. I don't mind." Ryoma's words swayed the stalemate.

"Fool..." Saitou responded to Ryoma's words promptly. "We have no reason to withdraw here! We'll be taking you, and those women, to the capital!"

"Oh? You're gonna risk your life to capture us?" Ryoma smiled coldly at Saitou's shout.

Ryoma could already see Shardina and Saitou had lost the will to fight.

"I can tell by your eyes that you have no intent to lose your lives here."

Eyes were more honest than words. One's gaze and gestures, the glint in their eyes, were windows into a person's heart and intent. Just like Saitou could tell Sara was resolved to fight to the death from the look in her eyes, Ryoma could read into Saitou's intentions.

“So what are you getting at? Isn’t your objective to kill us?”

“Well, yeah, that’s my intent, but... look at this situation.” Ryoma answered Shardina’s question with a shrug.

I knew it... He got himself caught so he could kill us. No wonder he was so docile...

A chill ran down Shardina’s spine. This was the anxiety Shardina had been feeling for a while now; the dread an animal feels when the murderous intent of a predator is fixed upon it.

It’s certainly a viable method. We would assume he’s only running, and wouldn’t expect him to try and strike back against us.

And this was the end result. The majority of her soldiers were spread out in the forest, and all those stationed in the camp were killed by the spell; had it not been for Saitou’s quick thinking, Shardina would have died in the surprise attack, too.

But this situation... It’s three to two in their favor. He might be able to kill us if he were to use these girls as discardable pawns. Why is he telling us to run... Is it a trap?

Shardina knew full well what kind of person the boy smirking coldly in front of her was. He would always put his own survival first, and he would not hesitate to take any measure, no matter how vile, to ensure that survival. This boy may have said he’d spare them, but she’d never believe it.

“I see... You don’t want to kill them.” Saitou whispered, and Shardina’s eyes opened wide in shock.

He didn’t want to kill them. But who was “them?” It couldn’t have been Saitou and Shardina, so that only left the girls.

“Yeah. These two are willing to put down their lives for me.” Ryoma turned his gaze to Sara and Laura. “So no matter how much killing you two here would up my chances at surviving in the long run, I can’t sacrifice these girls so readily to do it.”

Self-interest. Affection. Those words were a mixture of many emotions mingled together.

I see, so if he were to use them as a shield... No, that’s impossible in this situation. And I can’t see this man putting their lives ahead of his own.

It just meant he valued these faithful sisters’ lives more than killing Saitou and Shardina— in no way was this supposed to mean he prioritized them over his own survival.

“I don’t think we have much of a choice here, Your Majesty...”

Saitou’s words matched Shardina’s thoughts on the matter. Think as she might, there was no other way out but this one.

“Fine... We’ll retreat. Saitou, put away your sword.”

Hearing Shardina’s words, Ryoma gave an order to the sisters.

“Laura, Sara, pull back.”

The two put away their swords at Ryoma’s order, rushing to his

side. They were intent on serving as Ryoma's shield at a moment's notice, should Shardina try to attack.

"No need to be so high-strung. I swear on my name as the Empire of O'lortmea's first princess that we will retreat from this place."

Shardina's words may have been honest, but the sisters didn't so much as stir. They simply gazed at her sharply.

"Sorry." Ryoma apologized to Shardina for the sisters' attitudes.

That wasn't to say Ryoma wasn't wary and vigilant even now. He wasn't foolish or gullible enough to blindly believe the enemy's words at this point in the game.

"Well, no matter. We'll retreat from here, but our pursuit of you will not end here. You do realize that, yes?"

That much was obvious. Shardina was only relinquishing the chance to capture Ryoma here because the current situation put her at a disadvantage. Put conversely, if Shardina's dozens of soldiers were present, they wouldn't be making the choice to retreat.

"Obviously. I'm a criminal for all you're concerned, after all." Ryoma said calmly.

There wasn't a trace of regret or fear in his eyes.

"But I'm not going to roll over and let you catch me. I don't think killing the geezer or trying to kill you were the wrong things to do, either. So if you intend to come after me, be prepared to lay down your lives."

"Did you commit crimes back in Japan, too?" Saitou asked, honestly curious.

People who'd just been summoned from Earth to this world didn't acclimate to its rules so easily. This was a world of survival of the fittest, where might made right, and there was no such lenient idea of 'human rights' to shield people from that nature. One would have to be strong if they didn't want to be trampled upon, even if it meant stomping out others to do it.

That was something Saitou only realized years after being summoned by Gaius and being thrown into a battlefield he never wished to be in, forced to fight through mud and blood. Life on Earth and this world were simply so far removed. And that was why he was suspicious upon seeing Ryoma's line of thinking, since he hadn't even been in this world for a whole week.

"Huh? Crimes? I guess I took a piss outside once or twice, but that's about it."

'Crime' was a word that could mean many things in different contexts. If one were to be extreme enough about it, crossing the street at a red light was certainly a crime. But that wasn't what Saitou meant.

"No, I meant more heavy crimes. Like... murder."

Those words made Ryoma exclaim in exasperation. Ryoma only ever saw himself as a normal high school student, so that was a natural reaction.

“You say some screwed up things, you know...? I’m just an average high schooler. I have some experience in martial arts, yeah, but that doesn’t mean I have a criminal record!”

“Then why? How could you kill people so easily? Aren’t you afraid?”

“...Let me ask you, then.” Ryoma said after pausing for thought. “Should I worry or care for someone who tried to infringe on my rights so much that they put themselves at risk over it?” After regarding the surprise in Saitou’s face, Ryoma continued. “This is what I think: you’re free to try and take advantage of me, and I’m free to defend myself. I’m not dumb enough to think that if I hit someone they won’t try to hit back, though. And it’s exactly because I know they’ll hit back that I try not to hit anyone, unless I’m prepared for them to retaliate... And when I’m resolved to kill anyone who dared pick a fight with me.”

As Ryoma spoke, his eyes shone with a strong light. The only thing that enabled a normal high schooler like Ryoma to kill Gaius was the strength of his heart. He believed in his justice ardently from the bottom of his heart. And in many ways, it was the most haughty ideology of all... But it was the most kind of all at the same time.

“But, anyway... We really don’t have the time to sit around discussing my life philosophy. Laura.” He jerked his chin in the direction of the tent’s entrance. “If we keep talking, the other soldiers might return to camp. I’ll be crossing the border.”

Laura stayed at the tent’s entrance, keeping Shardina and Saitou in check. They didn’t trust her words entirely.

“Fine. Go on, then. But remember this: now that we know what you look like, you will never step foot in the Empire’s borders again.” Shardina said, her gaze turning sharp. “And you’d do well to run as hard and far as you can. The western continent will belong to the Empire before long. And when it does, you won’t have anywhere left to live in peace.”

Shardina’s words were like a dagger thrown in Ryoma’s direction, as he made his way out of the tent, accompanied by Sara.

“Is that right... Guess I’ll have to find my way back home before that happens, then.” And with that, Ryoma disappeared into the forest without a word, not bothering to look back at her...



Epilogue

“What is the meaning of this?!” A shout of anger reverberated through the audience chamber.

It was the voice of the Iron-Blooded Minister, Durnest. The Emperor who lorded over the audience chamber listened to Shardina’s words, his elbow resting on his throne’s armrest.

“That concludes my report. You may do as you will.”

Standing before the Emperor were Shardina and Saitou, along with Celia, Rolfe and Orlando; the commanders of the search party.

The memories of the few days that followed the incident surfaced in Saitou’s mind. After Ryoma and his group got away, Shardina waited until dawn and gathered the soldiers dispatched to the forest. She gambled on the faint hope that they would yet catch up to Ryoma, and threw all her forces to that pursuit. She would only let him get away as long as she didn’t have the forces to hunt him down, and once her soldiers were gathered, the situation had changed. However, Shardina didn’t find Ryoma in the end.

“So it was all for naught, then...”

“I don’t think this could have been avoided...” Saitou replied to her whisper. “It took us too long to gather the troops...”

Ryoma likely assumed he’d be pursued. A normal person who interpreted his opponent’s words however he would was convenient for them, and such a person would believe they wouldn’t be pursued until they left the border. It was the fact that Ryoma never made those kinds of naive mistakes which made him so formidable.

“Let’s head back to the capital.”

Those words made Saitou grimace. Now that they’d failed to capture Ryoma, they had no reason to loiter around in the forest. They’d have to lift the blockade on the border checkpoint too, or it might strike a blow to their economy. That applied to Celia’s group in the south, too.

But while he understood that perfectly well, Saitou couldn’t easily agree to this decision, because he wasn’t pleased with how Shardina dealt with the situation. Failing to apprehend Ryoma was a huge blunder, and the worst part wasn’t that they had failed to catch him, but the fact they had succeeded and he still got away in spite of that. There were even casualties among their knights. Even if they couldn’t anticipate Ryoma having collaborators, there was no getting around

the fact Shardina had failed at her duty.

“Durnest’s gonna steam like a kettle over this.”

Saitou could easily imagine the minister shouting them down in the Emperor’s audience chamber. As his name implied, he was a statesman with a will of steel and the resolve to spill his own blood if need be. Even a royal like Shardina wouldn’t make him change his attitude.

“Lady Celia will be problematic, too.”

Having her family killed made her the most zealous out of everyone involved in this mission. How would they explain this to her?

“Well... We’ll think of something. Celia is no fool. If we explain the situation, I doubt she’d try to find any more fault.”

That might be true if this was Celia in any other situation...

Saitou doubted she’d keep the same levelheadedness with her family killed. Perhaps reading his thoughts from his expression, Shardina shrugged her shoulders.

“I’ll take care of it. Whatever the case, we have no choice but to return to the Emperor.”

With that said, Shardina left the forest behind and regrouped with Celia. And now, she could only wait for her judgment after explaining all that happened.

“Even an Imperial princess cannot be forgiven for such failure!”

“Durnest. Shut up for a while.” The Emperor’s voice cut down Durnest’s words as he prepared to scold her even more severely.

Saitou shook off the thoughts in his mind and turned his concentration to the Emperor.

“I have no intention of finding fault in Shardina’s handling of the situation.” His grave voice reverberated through the throne room.

“But... Your Grace!” Durnest’s face was washed over with surprise.

“Obey me, Durnest!” The Emperor said, pounding on the armrest with his elbow. “True, Shardina failed to fulfill my order. That much is fact. But the man’s skill was beyond prediction. What could she have done differently?”

The Emperor’s words left Durnest at a loss for words. And he was right. If anything, the fact that they had caught him once was close to a miracle considering they didn’t have a name or a face to go by. Durnest knew this.

“But we cannot let the otherworlder get away.”

The empire’s dignity was at stake, and that was the most important part of all for Durnest.

“I know. However. Shardina and Saitou are both crucial members of my Empire’s forces. Even if it is for the sake of killing the despicable man who slew Gaius, I could not afford to have them

sacrificed for it and weaken my Empire in so doing.”

No matter how low the probability, they couldn't afford to lose the captain and vice-captain of the Succubus Knights, the pride and joy of the Empire. It was exactly now, when they were weakened by Gaius's death, that losing more people who could make up for that loss would hamper their plans for domination.

Considering the many factors at play, Shardina's choices were apt ones.

“However...” The Emperor's gaze fell to Shardina.

These were not the eyes of a father looking upon his daughter, but of a king ordering a vassal.

“Unavoidable though it was, you have still failed to obey my orders. Henceforth, I order you to take over Gaius's place, and conquer the eastern countries!”

Shardina and the other four present lowered their heads at once. They realized that in place of a punishment, the Emperor had granted them a new posting to gather merits in, and make up for their failures.

“We will answer your expectations, at all costs!” Shardina's voice echoed through the throne room.

On this day, the Empire of O'ltormea began its conquest of the eastern lands in earnest, a movement that would go on to involve the escaped Ryoma Mikoshiba. The western continent was on the cusp of a great event.

Afterword

To start with, I would like to greet any first time readers who picked up Record of Wortenia War just now. I also wish to say hello again to those of you who have read the Feather edition of the book. I'm the author, Ryota Hori, AKA Hou.

Firstly, I would like to take the chance to apologize to the readers who picked up the Feather paperback editions of Record of Wortenia War. Unfortunately, due to extenuating circumstances, the publication had to be stopped halfway through volume 2. I offer my sincere apology to anyone who may have been inconvenienced by this.

I'm sure there are people who don't know what happened here, so I'll explain it briefly. Originally, this series was serialized as a web novel on a site called 'Shousetsuka ni Narou' (Let's Become Authors), where the story has currently progressed to its fifth volume, and we decided to publish it with some corrections and edits. Of course, I have a grasp on where the story will go from here, but over the last two years we have had several unexpected circumstances, and we sadly had to cancel the publication of the Feather paperback edition.

I've personally spent the majority of last year believing I would simply have to see the series through to its conclusion via the web novel version, but it so happened that at the end of last year, I came into contact with someone involved with Hobby Japan, and received a chance to have the series republished by HJ Novels.

I'm very grateful to the people who gave me this chance, and to the readers who bought the novel version. I intend to see the series to its conclusion with HJ Novels and with the help of the new illustrator, bob, and would be glad to have your continued support going forward.

I hope you will continue to enjoy Record of Wortenia War!

Shardina's Morning

"Princess, it is time to awaken."

Shardina's private maid called out to her from behind the bedroom door, accompanied by a knock.

As soft rays of morning sunlight streamed in through gaps in the curtains, the first princess of the empire of O'tormea, Shardina Eisenheit, turned in her sleep atop her luxurious bed. A sorrowful moan escaped her soft, white peach like lips. A pair of sensual, snow-white legs appeared from under the well-made, feather-filled covers. Her gorgeous limbs had equal part the alluring beauty of an adult woman, and the charm of a girl who hadn't yet reached full maturity.

The fact Shardina was still unwed was somewhat unusual among the nobility, where it was the norm for one to get married as early as their late teens. O'tormea was counted among the strongest nations on the western continent. As its emperor's daughter, Shardina would not be hard pressed to find a groom no matter how unsightly her appearance might have been.

But on top of being, in fact, one of the emperor's most trusted people and a general of many military exploits, Shardina's appearance boasted what one wouldn't hesitate to call a perfect beauty.

She bore a spotless combination of lineage, pedigree, intelligence and social status, but compounded on it with valor and resourcefulness; many would wish to wed such a woman. And indeed, she'd received many, in fact incessant, proposals. Mostly from high ranking nobles from across the empire, but also from the royal families and influential nobility of other countries.

So if anything could explain the fact she wasn't married yet, it could be attributed to two facts; she was far too skilled, and that among the emperor's many children, she was especially beloved by her father.

"Princess, it is time to wake up!"

The maid's tone had become a bit strict, and the knocks on the door came across as a bit louder. Her name was Emma; a maid who had served Shardina since the princess's infancy, and as of now the only person allowed to enter her private quarters.

Realizing that Shardina wasn't responding to her calls, Emma sighed and took the room's key out of her apron's pocket.

"Whatever will I do with you, princess..."

What greeted Emma upon entering the room was the sight of Shardina with the blankets pulled over her head and very adamantly ignoring the possibility of waking up and getting out of bed.

“Come now, princess, time to get up. It’s morning, you hear? Morning!”

Emma tore the covers off of her and began shaking her shoulders. It was an act that would get anyone else surely executed for impiety against the crown, but given that this was how she had woken Shardina up for many years, it would have come all far too late.

“Ugh... I know it’s morning, I get it, so just let me sleep a little longer...”

“Another all-nighter, milady?” Emma shook her head, glancing at the papers littering the desk adjacent to her bed. “I understand how important your work can be, but please, do not neglect your health for it.”

And while Shardina was obviously acting spoiled, Emma had served her for many years and understood her position. A bit of oversleeping wasn’t something she couldn’t overlook. Especially over the last few days, she’d become extremely busy. Yes, ever since that day a fire broke out in the castle...

Emma then placed the blanket over Shardina again, and closed the curtains, shutting out the rays of morning sunlight from the room.

How dreadful... The thought crossed Emma’s mind as she unlocked the door to Shardina’s room again. *It seems it’ll be quite a while until Lady Shardina would give birth to a child I could care for...*

Sara’s Oath

A cage was set on the carriage’s luggage tray, jolting each time the wheels drove over a rock on the road.

How long had it been since that nightmarish day? The girls sat inside the cage, hugging their knees. They all feared and dreaded the fate awaiting them. Each time Sara heard the sound of a sob coming from one direction or another, she felt anger and hatred swirl in her heart.

“What’s... What’s going to happen to us now...? Are Mother and Father all right...?”

As her sister clung to Sara’s body, a cough escaped her lips. Hearing those words, Sara tightened her grasp on her sister’s hands. There was no point to asking that question by now. The fact these young girls were sold to a slave merchant told all one would need to know to draw the right conclusion, and that was a truth that applied to the two sisters’ parents just the same.

Their father had sworn lifelong fealty to the Kingdom of Quift, and it went without saying he wasn’t one to turn his back on his country as it hinged on the verge of collapse to flee in self-preservation. Were he that shrewd, perhaps the vassals he entrusted

his daughters to wouldn't have done something as foolish as betraying them, and the sisters would never have fallen to the plight of being sold to this slave merchant.

Sara's sister wasn't so foolish so as to not understand that. The sight of her sister holding back her anxiety spurred Sara to support her from the bottom of her heart. Misfortune befell these poor sisters, their days of affluent peace crumbling to ashes one day, disappearing along with their family and vassals into the flames. They were left all alone and cast down into slavery.

"Sara..."

The hollow look in her Laura's eyes sent ripples through Sara's heart. Laura was always good at everything. She was gentle and kind, and always more skilled than Sara in both martial arts and thaumaturgy. But the same sister she always looked up to was now sitting terrified next to her.

"It'll be all right, Laura. I'm sure things will get better one way or another."

That was the lie Sara concocted to suppress the anxiety bubbling up in her heart, a bluff she tried to convince herself with using all her might. A lie even a child would see through. And yet, the light of will returned to Laura's eyes.

"You're right... I'm sorry."

Those words were so faint and weak, they hardly reached Sara's ears.

As the sun set that day, the carriage finally arrived at a certain citadel city, protected on all sides by sturdy walls. Outside the carriage they could hear the lively tumult of people passing through. The carriage rolled along the main street, eventually disappearing into a large manor.

"Hey, we're here." The door to the cage opened, and a middle-aged man with a vulgar visage barked at them angrily. "Get off, starting with the ones closest to the door."

Such a big manor... Any merchant that can support such a large estate won't simply use us and leave us to rot. We'll definitely find a chance to escape.

They still had a final, hidden means to freedom their father once taught them. Right now, that path was closed to them, but they had definitely acquired the thaumaturgy to make it possible.

"Laura. Let us obey for now."

Seeing the resolve burning in Sara's eyes, Laura nodded back in equal.

Laura's Thoughts

Three figures ran across the dark forest, heading east. The only thing lighting their way was the faint moonlight spilling from the heavens. Their rough breathing reverberated through the otherwise silent, deep forest.

“There should be a watering hole nearby.”

As Sara, who took the lead, said those words, the sisters’ master, Ryoma Mikoshiba, nodded wordlessly.

Laura, who had taken on guarding the rear of their formation, snuck a glance back. They were on the run, and from the empire of O’ltormea, which ruled over the center of the western continent. Their clever scheming helped them shake off their pursuers once, but they couldn’t afford to be complacent.

“There’s no signs of a pursuit. We should be fine. It would be difficult for them to gather the troops they’ve scattered around the forest.”

“Right... Then let’s take a quick break here.”

His breathing was terribly disturbed. He tried to feign calmness with his tone of voice, but it was clear that Ryoma’s stamina was awfully depleted. Still, he’d kept up with the sisters, who’d reinforced their bodies with martial thaumaturgy.

His stamina is astounding, and he has a heart of steel to match that. It’s almost frightening... That’s why this man is capable of escaping the empire... and how he changed our fates.

The man who changed these sisters’ destinies. Looking at his large back, the memory of that day surfaced in Laura’s mind.

It was six months ago that their then-master, Azoth the slave merchant, informed them of their migration to the western continent. Azoth was already looked upon coldly by people in the same trade as him for his business tactics, but after failing magnificently in a transaction, he’d ended up earning the ire of others.

Sensing his life was at risk, Azoth likely had no other way to avoid the assassins sent after him but to move to another continent. Carrying all the fortune and assets he could carry and the finest slaves, he’d boarded a ship, sailing around and selling his slaves to influential people in order to recoup his losses and make a comeback as a slave merchant.

Laura and Sara. The only reason they were left unsold until the very end was because their prices were simply too high. Their appearance, pedigree, intelligence and martial prowess; they were perfect in just about every regard. And they were even chaste and had yet to know a man. Their price outdid even that of the finest jewelry.

Watching their fellow slaves being sold one after another, Laura spent her days grappling the paralyzing fear that next time may be

their turn.

Yes, until that fateful day...

That day they were beset by bandits, and, throwing everything else had away, Azoth ran off to protect his own hide. Having been left behind in the carriage's compartment, the sisters were unable to do anything. As she turned her gaze away from the stench of the bandits' breath, Laura could only curse her fate.

But the goddess of destiny granted the two her mercy.

I want to serve this man. To do something for him...

Was it a sense of obligation, a debt, or perhaps admiration for the one who saved them from adversity? Those words carried some truth to them, but somehow felt not entirely pertinent. But whatever it was, the only thing in Laura's heart was loyalty and devotion for the man called Ryoma Mikoshihira. With those feelings in her heart, Laura simply continued gazing at that large, bear-like back of the man before her. She simply looked on, silently...

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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 1

by Ryota Hori

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